THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T DIE

ARTHUR STRINGER

An Amazing Story of Farther North

The Woman Who Couldn't Die

By ARTHUR STRINGER

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15-

THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T DIE

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A WOMAN AT DUSK

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By

Arthur Stringer

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
	A Prologue in Hordoland	11
I	The Frontiers of Adventure	32
II	The Arrow of Gold	61
III	The Overland Route	80
IV	We Encounter a Woman	107
V	The Fire-God Asserts Himself	121
VI	The Master of Magic	134
VII	The Sleeping Woman	156
VIII	A Death for a Death	175
IX	The Exile from Outside	184
X	The Pilgrim Soul	198
XI	Lines of Communication	209
XII	Women and the Love of Women	219
XIII	The Wayward Flesh	228
XIV	Pacing the Cage	240
XV	The Path along the Sky	248
XVI	The Woman Desired	266
XVII	The Cascade of Fire	282
XVIII	The Battle in the Clouds	292
XIX	The End of the Trail	309

THE WOMAN WHO COULDN'T DIE

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A PROLOGUE IN HORDOLAND

I

The fiord air was windless and humid. So heavy was it, in fact, that the sweat stood out on the bronzed bodies of the rowers as, at a sign from Sigurd Blödoxe, they sat with suspended oars. They sat motionless, making a picture that drifted swan-like in the mirroring quiet of the pearl-misted afternoon.

"Yonder comes Gunhild," announced the tawny-haired Sigurd.

Graafeld, who stood beside him on the gilded skuta-poop, grunted aloud as he detected the bobbing blond head of a swimmer slowly bearing down on them. This swimmer, whose strokes grew

more labored as he came closer, was plainly exhausted by the tides which he had been opposing.

"Give him a hand aboard there," commanded the captain of the high-prowed craft. And a dozen hairy arms reached over the low freeboard to help the tired adventurer back to his ship.

Gunhild, lying on the sun-bleached deck-boards, let the warmth of life once more soak into his bones. Blödoxe, with a half-smile about his untroubled blue eye, watched the heaving chest until its movements became less spasmodic.

"What found you in the gut?" he asked. His head-nod toward the inner fiord-end was a curt one.

"Women," replied Gunhild, turning on the wet boards. "Nothing but women."

"Doing what?" demanded Blödoxe, his mailed shoulders stiffening into a sterner line.

"Bathing," retorted the other. "Bathing along the sands of the inner cove, a full dozen of them, like seal-pups along a Lofoden rock-ledge!"

"And Thera?"

Gunhild, sitting up, slowly buckled on the

bronze-studded sword-belt of ox-hide that had been silently tossed to his side, and then through the belt thrust the leaf-shaped sword of tempered bronze.

"Thera is there," he explained as he continued to dress. "She is there with a fathom or two of yellow hair down about her white body, sunning herself on the cove-sand."

A harder light came into the blue-green eye of the Viking chief from the Baltic mouth. Hunger, like a shadow, passed over the bronzed square face under the winged helmet crested with its raven of gold.

"This, then," he proclaimed as he glanced along the freeboard ringed with its barrier shields of bronze and leather, "is the day that I take her."

A frown crept over the face of Graafeld, the oldest and the dourest of the trio on the after-deck.

"Thera is to be given as wife to Haakon, the son of Hlaford," he reminded his younger chief. "And there would be scant room on these seas for the ravisher of a woman loved as Thera is loved."

Blödoxe's laugh was deep and indifferent.

"Then, by the hammer of Thor, we shall seek us out other seas where we may find peace with the lady!"

"That means you must travel far," protested the heavy-jowled Graafeld.

"And why must I travel far?"

"Because Olaf of Hordoland is both hot of blood and proud of heart. And a jarl of that breed will not see a daughter thus dishonorably taken without embarking after the taker. And Haakon, equally dishonored, would harry and hunt you until the end of time."

Still again Blödoxe laughed his deep-chested laughter. And there was pride in his glance as his eye wandered over the stout-timbered galley with the salt-crusted dragon of gold at its prow.

"They travel fast who overtake Blödoxe," he proclaimed. "And having overtaken him, they are lucky indeed when they live to tell just how they caught the sea-lion by its tail."

But the laughter, the next moment, went out of his eyes.

"I want this woman," he said as he tightened the heavy-buckled belt about his waist. "Twice, now, my eyes have rested on her, and I understand well enough why her beauty is a byword up and down this coast of herring-slitting wenches with little more charm than a she-cod on a smoking-rack. She may be the daughter of the Jarl of Hordoland and she may be duly promised to the lily-skinned Haakon. But that does not figure in the stars as I read them. If I have the wit to take her, and the power to hold her, she by the rights of our breed belongs to me."

"She herself being willing," amended the frowning Gunhild.

That, for a moment, seemed to hold the other.

"Reason may come in at the door," he finally retorted, "when freedom has flown out of the window. And that is not the first of my troubles. Our duty at the moment is to pluck the fruit while the branch swings low. So we shall divide into two groups, one to clamber quietly up over the cliffs and steal down on the cove from the rear, the other to

take the 'Dragon' as silently up into the gut, so that we may close in on this white-skinned band of Thera's from two sides. And all must be seemly. In this attack, bear in mind, there must be no raping and killing. There must be no violence. That man who violates a woman will be put to the sword."

"And you yourself?" questioned Graafeld with his sober enough half-smile.

"I will take Thera," announced Blödoxe.

"But any man who violates woman——" began the other with his huge hands outspread.

"I will take her," averred the Viking with the ruminative eyes, "but in taking her she will be accorded the honor of a queen and the daughter of a queen."

It was Gunhild who muttered aloud as he clambered down the worn footway between the rowers' benches.

"He abducts his towering queen of beauty," that swart sea-rover rumbled in his chest, "but he abducts her, mark you, with all the gentleness of a sucking lamb!"

II

It was the wolf-hound stretched at Thera's feet that lifted an ear, stirred and then growled deep in his throat. Thera, however, gave neither thought nor speech to that movement. Her sea-blue eyes, as she sat indolently combing her hair of gold with a comb of gold more pallid than the tresses through which it so slowly passed, were abstracted and unfocused. Yet there was queenliness in her lassitude and an aura of dignity even in her languor.

"Down, Fleotan!" she called as the hound rose to his feet, his back a-bristle.

She was about to repeat that command when the unformed words died on her lips. For through the mother-of-pearl mist along the gut-water she detected, or thought she detected, a movement that was both uncertain and ambiguous. Her languidly roving eye seemed to make out a gilded skuta-prow creeping shadow-like about the shadowy promontory at the cove-mouth. She could not be sure, for a moment, whether the wide-breasted dragon of gold was indeed an actual sea-boat drift-

ing into those sheltered waters, or merely a mirage, a foolish image born of her own foolish brain.

But that question was all too promptly answered for her. It was not, in truth, the idle mirage of an idle afternoon. For at the same instant that Fleotan's bay echoed deep-noted between the fiord-walls a chorus of higher-pitched screams burst from the young tire-women bathing and wading along the sandy beach. There was a sudden flurry of white bodies from the shallows.

"Sea-robbers!" cried the youngest of that flying band as they ran, huddling low, for the shelter of the cliff-rocks. Yet they recoiled again, even as sharply as they had advanced. For down on them from the crags above came circling and sliding a dozen swart men, men unknown to them, evil-eyed men from another country and another coast. And as the women ran screaming back into the sea-water the gilded skuta grounded on the cove-sand, within a boat-length of where Thera's handmaidens stood with something more than horror in their eyes. And from a garth, high overhead, geese trumpeted.

Thera herself did not join in that commotion. She was not a daughter of swineherds. Her only movement, in fact, was to rise frowningly to her feet and throw a tunic of woven Finnish wool about her white shoulders. It was a heavy tunic, colored like a rowan-leaf first touched with frost, regally lined with swan's-down and bordered with miniver. And about it fell her hair of living and liquid gold, gold luminous as a cat's eye by night, gold indiscernibly vivid yet soft, with a muffled radiance all its own, like that of a rose-leaf behind which a candle burns.

And thus cloaked, a new dignity came to her queenly figure. But her face remained clouded as the bronzed and thick-shouldered Blödoxe leaped waist-deep into the cove-water and with the arrogance of the fearless began to wade ashore. Under her breath, indeed, she must have spoken some word to the wolf-hound. For Fleotan, as the Viking came toward her, sprang straight for the throat of the intruder.

Blödoxe, in the face of that assault, merely

laughed aloud. For the bronzed and hairy hands that could be so quick in movement met in some way about the longer-haired neck of the animal. There was a moment's struggle as the great fingers clamped closer about the writhing throat and as the snarling head was thrust and held under the sea-water. Then, tossing the quieted body disdainfully aside, Blödoxe strode up the beach-sand to where Thera stood with one hand pressed flat against her white shoulder-flesh.

Whatever her secret impulses, she still remained motionless. A berserk-gang was a berserk-gang, but she was no swineherd's daughter. She knew what that advance, what that attack, meant. She knew also the sun-darkened square face with the tawny hair under the battered rim of the helmet. Jarl Olaf, her father, had only a year before denied that lawless scourge of the northern seas both the banquet-hall of his home and the hand of his daughter who was not for pirates and coast-plunderers steeped in blood. And now——

But Sigurd Blödoxe gave her scant time for

thought, just as he wasted no moment on speech. He merely stooped low and caught her about the knees, the knees that showed ivory white through the miniver-bordered tunic. He merely caught her up, swinging her from her feet and flinging her over his broad shoulder, even as he turned in his tracks and started back toward the galley.

And that, plainly, held little of the respect due to one of royal blood. For it was then that Thera began to fight. It was then, raging against the ignominy of her oat-sack position, that she began to twist and writhe and struggle in the great-thewed arm of her captor. Where she saw flesh, she clawed at it with her nails. Where she could find a loose tress of tawny hair, she clutched at it and did her utmost to tear it from the helmeted skull. Where she could sink her teeth into an unarmored forearm, she bit at the corded muscles, bit with the ferocity of a wild animal, forgetting at last that she was the daughter of a jarl.

Blödoxe, hip-deep in the cove-water, stopped short at that and swung her about, shaking her as a

terrier shakes a rat. He shook her so that the woolen tunic fell aside and her white body was half undraped as he held her at arm's length, partly in and partly out of the water. Yet he viewed her indifferently, with a grimness born of many harryings.

"Kill me," gasped Thera, her scorn of him overcoming even her fear. "Kill me as you killed my dog!"

"That I will not," retorted Blödoxe, still studying her face. "We kill only whom we hate."

"Your hate is all I ask," cried Thera, storming again against his strength. Froth even came from her mouth, as from the bitted mouth of a horse, hard-driven.

"That you will never get," contended her captor. And quietly yet firmly he held her as she still again struggled to free herself from his clasp. She was both taller of body and more flower-like of face, he decided, than he had pictured her in his memory.

"Haakon will kill you for this," she panted.

"And all Hordoland will keep at your heels, will keep after you until the six seas can no longer hide you."

"Even so," averred the grim-eyed Blödoxe, "you are mine, and you are coming with me."

And with that he caught her closer and resumed his approach to the galley-side.

"I will kill myself," murmured the woman in his arms, speaking so quietly that the half-smile went again from his lips.

"You are much too fair for an end so foul," he said with a heavy effort at mockery. His face clouded, however, when a moment later he saw her so passive in his arms. She lay there, unresisting and relaxed, with her eyes closed and a wistful puckering of the deep-cut lips that made him think of the mouth of a child, sorely hurt.

Yet his face was once more hard and his manner was pirate-rough as he flung her bodily over the weathered gunwale and clambered up after her. For already, from the cliffs high overhead, came the alarm of many horns and the echo of angry

shouts. The plunderer of untold coasts merely stopped long enough to wrap the woman in her fallen wet tunic, lift her to the fore-cabin under the carved prow, and put his own ship's horn to his lips to recall his scattered men.

"They will be after us," said Graafeld with a curt glance along the cliff-tops, "before another dog can be drowned."

"Then head for the open sea," commanded Blödoxe as he signaled for Gunhild to take the heavy tiller.

"And once there?" questioned the phlegmatic Graafeld as the rowers came clambering aboard.

"Then we will lay her head due west," said Blödoxe, "and if need be, go on to Jöklarland. And beyond that, the Danes tell me, there be other lands, lands of green ice and many islands and strange people who live at peace with their neighbors."

"And?" prompted Graafeld.

"It may so fall out that we shall go to that farther land," said the quiet-lipped Blödoxe.

"In flight?" asked the saturnine Gunhild.

"Jarl Olaf has many ships," observed Blödoxe. "And men have gone far in the search of a lost woman."

III

The eyes of Thera, once the fairest woman of all Hordoland, remained clouded and inscrutable as the fleeing "Dragon" traversed her lonely northern seas. Seldom did the captive of Sigurd Blödoxe speak, as she sat high and lonely in the galley's castle, and never once was she seen to weep. Hour by silent hour she watched the men at the oars; she watched the bellying square-sail; she watched the plunging green seas on which the tarnished gilded prow rose and fell and rose and fell until all life seemed merely a dream of endless rocking on an endless watery trail that led always toward a slowly setting sun.

Even when they saw land, at last, misted glens and coves and precipitous walls of basalt surmounted by straggling snow-fields, to the north of their course, the queenly woman with the brooding

blue eyes betrayed little interest in that distant country to which they were taking her.

But she had her own thoughts on the matter, plainly enough, for, having studied the wake that lay behind their rudder, the wake that lay between her and her lost Hordoland, and having gazed at the desolate and rocky table-land that loomed ever higher on their quarter, she stood for many moments with her eyes closed and her hand pressed on her heart. Then, gathering her tunic about her, she crossed slowly to the rail of the ship, looked up at the sky arching so pallidly above her and flung herself headlong into the sea.

Blödoxe, braced at the tiller, saw that unexpected movement and felt his blood run cold. But he lost little enough time in hesitation. Flinging off helmet and sword-belt, he plunged in after her. He dove from the dipping poop-rail and for a moment was lost in a mountain of green. Over tumbling wave by wave he fought his way to the white body enmeshed in its floating gold. He came up with her, stroke by powerful stroke. He caught

her and held her head above water, lifting, as he did so, the strangling wet hair from her face. Then, swimming more easily, he supported her there in the tumbling green seas until the dusky-lidded blue eyes opened again.

"Let me die," she said with a moan of weariness. "Please let me die!"

"Not while I live," proclaimed the man at her side.

"Oh, be merciful and let me die," she repeated, making an effort as though to push his great sinewed body away from her.

"Have I wronged you that deep?" he asked, a note of wonder in his voice. For, as never before, he was conscious of something pitiful in the pallid face so close to his own.

"You have wronged me beyond forgiveness," she told him, turning away as the galley, doubling about, came bearing down on them.

"Then it is I who should die," said Blödoxe, with wonder on that face scarred by many blades. And at those unlooked-for words she let her gaze

lock with his. So, as they floated there in the heaving waters, side by side, they looked each into the eyes of the other. And if, from that strange and silent study, they gleaned anything of moment, they kept that discovery to themselves. For they were oddly quiet as they were lifted aboard the galley. And Thera, when her tall body was once more dry and warm, sat apart, deep in thought. Those watching her, in fact, observed for the first time that she was weeping, weeping openly and abandonedly. And when Blödoxe, sorely troubled in heart, finally went to comfort her as well as a man rough of speech could comfort a woman thus desolated, she surprised him by not turning silently away but by clinging to his shoulders and weeping more abandonedly than ever, by resting in his great arms and pillowing what seemed a hopelessly tired head on his shoulder.

So astonished was Blödoxe, in truth, that when Gunhild called out that three Norse sails were following after them, the master of the galley showed scant concern in that discovery.

"Would you be overhauled by your enemies?" demanded Graafeld, squinting back at the heavy-timbered skutas so doggedly bearing down on them.

But Blödoxe, after one glance at the plunging galleys with the bronze-studded shields along the freeboards, let his eyes rest again on the face of the woman so forlornly clinging to his shoulders.

"That," he told her, "is Haakon and Olaf of Hordoland. And now, of a truth, I would know your will. Shall I take you back to them?"

Thera, for a moment, did not speak.

"They will kill you," she finally said.

"What odds?" cried Blödoxe with his ever-careless and deep-chested Viking laugh.

"They would kill you," repeated the woman with the strangely troubled eyes.

"And is that a matter of any great moment?" asked the man with the wind-bronzed face.

Thera did not answer him. By word of mouth, at least, she made no answer to that question. But in her eyes of immemorial blue must have been some semblance of a reply. For Blödoxe, after

looking deep into those azure pools, turned about and called a sudden order to his helmsman.

"Lay her head due west," was that abrupt command. "And every man to the oars."

"Due west?" questioned the somber-faced Graafeld, with a wistful look at the basalt cliffs they were leaving behind them.

"Due west," repeated Blödoxe. "For we now follow Eric the Red to that new country of his known as Greenland. And we can prove there is still speed in the 'Dragon.'"

"But damned little fight," Graafeld muttered in his throat as, staring over the rail and studying the three Norse skutas, he solemnly licked his lips.

Blödoxe, overhearing that mutter where he stood with an arm about Thera, called back over his shoulders: "Something better than fighting, Old Gray-Coat!"

Graafeld busied himself tightening a rope about a salt-encrusted deck-block.

"And after Greenland?" he asked with a shrug of paraded unconcern.

"Still farther west, if need be," said Blödoxe as he lifted a lappet of wolf-skin about Thera's shoulders, to the end that the freshening wind might not chill her white body.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FRONTIERS OF ADVENTURE

I AM not a scholar. What I have to tell must be told plainly, and, I fear, without much art. It will be told as simply and honestly as I am able. Omissions there may be, and at times I shall speak of things which I can not fully understand, for the adventures whereof I write were of themselves mysterious. Since I went through those adventures twenty-seven long years have slipped away, and memory, I find, has the trick of more and more playing me false. But I will say what I have to say as clearly as I can, knowing that the matters I speak of are not always easy of belief, yet heartened by the remembrance that I myself have witnessed them, and coming through them with a whole skin and a sound mind, am now able to tell them to

others. And the unkenneling of these curious doings, I pray God, will not only discharge an ancient debt to the honorable dead but will also serve to bring peace to an old heart and rest to an old head.

The beginning of these events dates back to the closing years of the last century, though I must explain that I, David Law, was a Glasgow-born lad sent early to Canada, where for three lonely years I was bookkeeper and under clerk in the trading-post of Andrew McCosh, some forty-odd miles north of Fort Metangami. McCosh, the dourest of dour Scotch-Canadians, was one of the last of the Free Traders along the receding fringe of the wilderness that moves for ever toward the Pole, a man of massive frame and massive appetites who from the first held me and my bookish disposition in small esteem. But my body toughened and my narrow shoulders widened under the rough usage of frontier existence, where I learned things even more varied than the sorting of furs that smelled not unlike the state of Denmark in the régime of Claudius and even more exciting than mushing through the

wintry backwoods with a team of huskies, any one of which would take a bite out of your brisket at the first possible chance.

But under Sandy McCosh I encountered neither peace of mind nor comfort of body, though it was not until the end of my third winter of overwork that I found the courage to tell the whiskered tyrant of that frozen little kingdom of solitude what I thought of him, and of his drunkenness, and of his loose conduct with redskin women that a lean season had laid more than ever in his power. For a year, after that, I taught in a mission-school, and beyond an ample supply of books to read got little for my efforts excepting my board and keep. Then, having done a good turn for a Mr. Curran, who injured his leg while moose-hunting in my district, I was eventually taken down to Montreal by that gentleman and given a position in his law-office. I became restive there, however, and before the year was out joined the staff of the *Herald* as a reporter.

My work with the *Herald*, I fear, made much greater demand on my legs than on my brain, for it

was my duty to cover the police-court, the water-front and shipping, the railways and hotels, the markets and hospitals and music-halls, and incidentally to catch on the wing any story worthy of print. Quite a number of these I picked up from Argonauts bound for the Klondike, since, following the Bonanza Creek strike of 'ninety-six, there had been a steady drift of eastern adventurers toward the Yukon.

One of my few friends in that oddly Old-World city on the St. Lawrence was a drunkard and a derelict scholar named Donald Cristie, who in his periods of sobriety was a proof-reader on the *Herald*, where his lapses of character were condoned because of a scholarship that was unique in newspaper circles and a knowledge that seemed equaled only in the encyclopedias. He was a son of Auld Reekie and claimed to be an honor graduate of the University of Edinburgh. But he had been a drifter, apparently, for the greater part of a long and eventful life, and among his other adventures had sojourned for three monastic years within the

walls of Francis Xavier College, where he assisted in the compilation and translation of the *Jesuit Relations*. He was rather an old man when I first knew him, old enough, indeed, to claim that he had split more than one bottle with Louis Stevenson in his time. And color was laid to this claim by a personal letter from the author of *Treasure Island* which he on one occasion placed before my rapt and eager eyes, for in those days I was much under the spell of my gifted fellow-countryman who had so recently and so romantically passed away in Samoa.

But as the rubicund and bloated figure of Donald Cristie appears only briefly and indirectly in this narrative, I must merely pause to add that the one fantastic ambition of this scholastic derelict was to embark on an exploring trip into the Far North. As, however, he walked with difficulty because of a stroke he had sustained a couple of years before I first knew him, and as he was chronically without funds, I accepted his talk about Arctic expeditions as merely the romancing of a mind already on the eve of dissolution.

That dissolution, however, was much closer than I had anticipated, for a second stroke, following the consumption of more Scotch whisky than I would care to disclose, put Cristie on his back and kept him there for the few remaining weeks of his life. He was then unable to talk, but after repeated and pitiful efforts on his part to communicate with me, I realized that he was trying to give me a message in regard to a packet of papers which he took from under his pillow. I thought at first it was a will, and, being young, I promptly sniffed the aroma of romance in the situation. On looking over the parchment pages, however, I found them yellowish with age and inscribed in a cramped hand and a language that was unknown to me. Yet on the night of his death he signified by pantomime that he wished me to keep these papers, together with a Moss-Giel edition of Burns which I valued much more highly.

It was not until two or three weeks after his burial, made possible by a collection taken up among the small circle sufficiently interested to keep

his interment from being an ignominious one, that I gave any sustained attention to the dog-eared document thus bequeathed to me. Then, taking it to Anatole Paradis, a friendly old book-dealer in St. Antoine Street, I found it to be written in eighteenth-century French and to deal in part with the career of a certain Father Valiquette, a Jesuit missionary-priest who had been unfrocked for a number of unchurchly acts which I need not here enumerate.

The ex-missionary, it seems, had set out in search of a lost tribe which Indian superstition credited as existing in the land of the midnight sun, and after three years of silence sent out word, by means of a group of Tokakagin gold-diggers who had drifted eastward in a Danish schooner, that he had not only found the lost tribe in question but that he was about to be put to death for violating a tribal sanctuary known as the Temple of the Timeless Virgin. Before meeting with the disfavor which resulted in his death, however, he found this strange tribe credulous enough to accept him as a

sort of Messiah, and even with the shadow of death over him proclaimed to his persecutors that a second and greater white prophet would come to them across the unknown mountains and redeem them from their ignorance. Nor was Valiquette so interested in the other world that he overlooked explaining certain physical attributes of his northern Eden, which he described as startlingly tempered in climate, for such a latitude, and as so rich in gold that hunting weapons and household tools were made of the precious metal, as were the mating-blocks, and even the steps and emblems of the tribal temples.

On the last page of the worn script was a roughly drawn map, of which neither the erudite old book-dealer nor I myself could make much, study it as we might. And, inviting as the document seemed to me, at my first glimpse through the cramped and age-yellowed script, the time soon came when I gave it little actual thought. For in those days, with the Klondike rush still on, there was talk enough all about me of gold and gold-

seeking, and week by week I encountered sufficiently fantastic plans for mastering the overland route to the Yukon and sufficiently fantastic dreams of a new El Dorado in the still little-known North. Day by day I saw these Argonauts stream into the city on the St. Lawrence and strike westward across the continent. And it was my duty, not to emulate them, but to write plausibly interesting paragraphs about them for an ever-hungry paper which gave me very little time for day-dreaming.

Too many waves of sensation, I'm afraid, played over me to permit my harried mind to dwell long on poor Cristie or his penny-a-liner's phantasy of polar treasure and unauthenticated arctic wanderers. From time immemorial, I knew, documents such as his had been fabricated by the unscrupulous and palmed off on the unsuspecting. And while, now and then, I would turn over the faded pages with a feeble revival of interest, they became more the memento of a lost companion than the inspiration of a future enterprise. And I had my daily bread to earn.

In the pursuit of that laudable ambition, not long afterward, I came into contact with another of earth's restless wanderers, with one of the oddest characters, in fact, it had ever been my good or bad fortune to encounter. The person I speak of was a swarthy-skinned Corsican called Ramolino, who later, for reasons best known to himself, changed his name to Pareso and thereafter insisted on being addressed by the latter patronymic. How great a liar Pareso may have been I then had no means of determining, but once, when under the influence of French brandy, he confided to me that he sprang from the same Ramolino family into which Carlo Bonaparte, the father of the great Napoleon, had married. There was that in his appearance, I must acknowledge, which gave a coloring of credibility to this claim, for more times than once the odd swarthiness of the man's skin, the thickness of his squat shoulders, the flash of fire from the imperial dark eye, the eagle-like profile of the face and the determinedly massive jaw, faintly reminded me of portraits that I had seen of the First Emperor. And

in the man's mental make-up, I was later to find, there was a distorted though persistent touch of the Napoleonic.

Carlo Pareso, as I must hereafter denominate him, first came to my attention as a man of science. What brought him to Montreal I never knew, but he claimed to be on his way from Vienna to the Orient, whither he was bound, eventually, to make a study of beri-beri in Japan. He became an object of press curiosity, however, when he proclaimed the possibility of obviating the annual ice-jam in the river by the use of a heat-producing chemical which he termed *Thermidian,** though he somewhat discounted my earlier impression of him as a sober-minded man of science by later outlining a plan for the damming of the Straits of Belle Isle and thereby not only shutting the southerly-drifting ice-bergs from our busy sea-lanes but altering the entire climate of eastern Canada. He told me himself, during our first interview, that he had recently

*This, I assume, must have borne some resemblance to the *Thermite* of later discovery.—DAVID LAW.

been experimenting, at Messina, with cold-light and luminescence in sea-fish and that he proposed in my country to carry on his research regarding the hibernation of certain terrestrial *mollusca* peculiar to northern latitudes. I might have been more impressed by this, had I not also learned that he had once been associated with an Egyptian professional cataleptic named Satahra Bey, an uncanny gentleman who had the habit of going into trances and permitting himself to be coffined and buried in sand for three days at a time.

My interest in Doctor Pareso suffered a natural decline, in fact, until he was once more thrust under my reportorial eye when I learned that the officials of the Royal Victoria Hospital had rather peremptorily refused to permit him the use of their surgery in experimenting with a simplified instrument for blood-transfusion. This instrument, which he later showed me, stood so small that it could be easily carried in the pocket. It was made up of the blood-controller, a small syringe, a stand for holding the syringe and controller, and the rubber tubing and

needles. A surgeon, he explained to me, could by himself and quite without help do the most satisfactory transfusion, all that was necessary being to insert one needle in the vein of the donor and the other in the vein of the recipient, and then push back and forth the plunger of the syringe. By means of two valves, acting solely under the force of gravity, the passage of whole blood from donor to recipient was automatically controlled and the danger of air-embolism and coagulation practically removed.

It all sounded convincing enough and I promptly scented drama in the discovery that the hospital authorities were resolutely set against co-operating with a man of genius, although a foreigner, who was fighting for the alleviation of human suffering. When, however, I applied at the hospital for some ponderable reason for this refusal I was dismissed with the somewhat pompous explanation that Doctor Pareso's papers were not in order and that his European references had not proved altogether satisfactory. This struck me, all

things considered, as a somewhat bigoted reversion to red-tapism, and with the fervor of youth I determined to wage journalistic warfare on the enemies of a man who impressed me as a genius and an agent of mercy. But my editor, I soon found, had experienced a sudden change of faith in this particular case, and I was more or less pointedly told that the columns of the *Herald* were no longer open to medical controversy. There were many rumors, it is true, the most conspicuous being that Pareso was an involuntary exile from Europe because of the death of a fellow-worker in one of his surgical experiments. Still another claimed he was a charlatan hypnotist who had been escorted over the border by the American authorities. Be that as it may, I began to find this mysterious stranger a most interesting man, a most persuasive talker, and the master of enough medical knowledge to astound my layman's mind.

I need not here go into his many experiments in the matter of suspended animation, such as desanguinating the Columbian ground-squirrel during

its hibernation-period when its body-temperature had dropped as low as forty degrees Fahrenheit, freezing it stiff, and then successfully reviving it. But he himself showed me a sleeping frog which he had preserved *in vitro* for eleven years and boasted that he could bring it to active life in half an hour's time. And with my own eyes I have seen him freeze fish in solid ice, keep them dormant and apparently dead for weeks, and then release and revive them so that they frisked about a tank as full of life as they were before their wintry sleep. He was also interested, I had reason to know, in cytology and cell-continuity, but I was too little versed in biology either to understand the nature of his experiments or to follow his line of thought when he mouthed about "the chromatin of the oocyte" and "longitudinally divided chromosomes." I can recall his excitement, however, when he came into possession of a handful of what was called "mummy wheat," which was wheat reputed to have been disinterred from an Egyptian tomb at least two thousand years old, and the care and patience

with which he tested this shriveled grain for some trace of fertility, though I found it hard to understand, at the time, why his failure to find any ghostly sign of life in the parched kernels which Pharaoh's slaves may have harvested should leave him so depressed in spirit.

But something occurred that midsummer that both drew me closer to this man Pareso and affected all the rest of my life. The event in question was the arrival at the head waters of the St. Lawrence of a weather-beaten yawl from Norway. This odd craft, called the *Lief Erickson*, manned only by three Norse mariners as weather-beaten as their boat, had set sail from the Norwegian port of Droennoey early in the spring, intent on following the old Viking trail to America. It was my duty as a water-front reporter to harvest the details of this foolhardy venture, and I was duly instructed to make the most of the story.

I had unexpected difficulties, however, in gathering my data, for the *Lief Erickson* was looked on with obvious suspicion by the harbor authorities,

and two days elapsed before the little ketch-rigged yawl of only thirteen tons was permitted to pass quarantine and obtain pratique. And when I finally stumbled aboard, on a sultry August night, I found the three hardy Norsemen very tenuously interested in a public exploitation of their adventure. This odd trio, in fact, were very much in their cups, evidently celebrating their arrival at their journey's end by the absorption of more Jamaica rum than was good for them. I tried as best I could to explain my business, but their limited knowledge of English must have led them to mistake me for one of the port officials who had been causing them so much trouble, for they bore down on me in a body and with Berserker shouts of recklessness threw me ashore.

I was disappointed but not discouraged by this treatment. I even went back the next day to find the *Lief Erickson* empty and a battered bronze padlock on the salt-crusted door. When I returned the following night, however, I found my three Norsemen at home. Lodbrog, a sailor, was asleep in his

bunk. Wickstram, the skipper, was drinking black coffee and seemed sober enough. He told me in broken English, once he was convinced of my friendliness, the chief events of their voyage: how the three of them had traveled nearly four thousand miles through northern seas, how they had been battered by waves and blocked by ice, how their water had run low and they had refilled their casks by catching rain in a spare sail, how in good weather they had increased the food supply in their lazarette by angling over the side, how they took turns at navigating and keeping watch and had to rig up a sea-anchor, to ride out the Grand Banks gales, and got lost in a fog in the Gulf, and grounded on Anticosti, and were all but run down by a liner, and, in the end, to my way of thinking, were almost justified in celebrating their delivery from the deep by this carousal that had left their wits heavy and their tongues swollen. I was shown the antiquated quadrant they used in making observations, Wickstram assuring me it had been in his family for over three generations and was at least a century old.

What most caught and held my attention, however, was the figure of the third seaman. He answered to the name of Karl Knutsson, and from a hint or two that was dropped, must at one time have been a smuggler along the Scandinavian coast. He was, all told, one of the most extraordinary men I have ever met, a towering Norse giant, a good six feet and three inches in height. I can still see him as he lay sprawled back that night under the swinging oil-lamp in the low-roofed cabin, the light shining on his tawny gold hair and his yellow beard that had glints of copper in it and his huge white-skinned torso where he had thrown open his shirt against the heat of the August night. The throat and forearms of that body, where the North Atlantic sun and wind had played on them for months at a time, were still a golden red, the red of Quebec sunsets over a black fringe of pine-tops. His eyes, although a little bloodshot from the alcohol that still soured in his huge hulk of a body, were the bluest eyes I had ever seen in a man, richer than Antwerp-blue and less opaque than sapphire, a

little lighter than the blue you see in the best of the old Dutch plates and a little darker than the luminous azure you see in a rainwashed northern sky in clearing spring water. His teeth were square and white, and his lips were full and red, so full and red that it gave his face a touch of the sensual.

Yet with all his size and strength there was a suggestion of womanishness about Knutsson. I can't be sure whether it was his passiveness or the soft blue of his eye and the softer gold of his hair or the milk-white skin of the body only half covered by its soiled clothing, but there was something challenging and expository about his beauty. For he was beautiful, in his gigantic Goth way, if you could only forget about his tainted breath and his unclean garments and his half-drunken, guttural, ribald yodeling as he lounged back and showed his disregard for my company by singing some unknown song in his native tongue. He was beautiful enough to make you think of Scandinavian mythology and wonder if Wodin and Thor must not have looked like this vivid, deep-chested, full-

blooded giant with the mane of tawny gold and the immemorial blue eyes that made you like the man in spite of his paraded weakness of character. For, oddly enough, I did find myself drawn toward this man Knutsson. I wanted to know him better, to find out more about him, to determine what lay behind that golden mask of indifference.

On that first night, it is true, he made no articulate response to the questions with which I plied him. He did not even deign to observe me. And when I asked the russet-skinned Wickstram if it was one of the old sagas of his people that Knutsson was singing, the skipper of the *Lief Erickson* merely laughed a raucous laugh.

"That ban a love song," he said in his groping English. "I dank he sing him so because he wants a woman."

"What woman?" I asked, eager to feel my way into the inner folds of romance. But Wickstram merely shrugged.

"Any woman," he said as he held a bottle up to the oil-lamp to see how much liquor remained in it.

Yet I was soon destined to know Knutsson better. It came about, in fact, because of the very impulses of the blood which Wickstram had so crudely hinted at. I had directed my steps, a few nights later, to the Lower Town, where I was hoping a visit to French Annie's would bring me certain information regarding a Chinese smuggling coup that had met with disaster on the Vermont border. It was very hot that night, and I could sniff the occasional little breaths of cooler air that drifted up from the St. Lawrence, where a liner was noisily coaling by bunch-light. In the narrow little streets of the Lower Town women and children lay out on the curb-stones, gasping for air. A drunkard or two reeled down through the sleeping figures that made one think of a battle-field strewn with its dead, and sometimes one of these staggerers would be followed by painted things in draggled skirts, who tried to stop them. On a corner three street-women started to squabble with a group of English sailors who looked young enough to be their sons, and a cab rumbled past with four drunken French-

men inside, and a curb-sleeper awoke and cried in blasphemous *patois* that a cat had bitten her foot. And that was the midnight city of my young manhood as I remember it, the Montreal of the century-end, a tatter of Marseilles and Montmartre, a shred of Bethnal Green, and a touch of Hell.

It was just under the old Jacques Cartier monument that I met Faubert, a coke-pedler who was a tipster for the police and the source of an occasional newspaper story for any leg-man who could buy his way into the graces of that owl-like wanderer.

"You're just in time," he cried as he caught my elbow. "There's been a murder down on the waterfront!"

"Who was it?" I asked as I joined him in scurrying down-hill.

"Tite Papineau knifed a big Swede," he said as he hobbled along at my side over the rough pavement. And my heart sank as I saw that he was directing me toward the shadowy slip where the *Lief Erickson* was tied up. For something told me

that the victim of that slum-drunkard's knife was my godlike, big, blond Viking, the man named Knutsson. And it impressed me as an ignominious end for a figure of such lengendary dimensions, a feeble way of going out for an adventurer so throbbing with life.

At the pier-end I could see a group of three women whispering together. On a moldy string-piece I caught sight of yet another woman, white-faced and young, half wailing and half moaning to herself as she sat there alone.

When I got to the cabin, however, I found only Wickstram inside, Wickstram with a great deal of his color gone as he stared helplessly down at the blood that covered his cabin floor. And lying in the center of this pool was Knutsson, half undressed, with a five-inch knife wound in his milk-white body.

My restless big Wodin, it was explained to me, had wandered up into the Street of Revelers and had there taken a young woman away from her duly acknowledged mate of the moment. And that

outraged mate, following the light-hearted couple to the then deserted yawl, had crept aboard and after the manner of his kind avenged that affront to his pride and property.

Sickened by the sordid tale and dizzy from what I had to kneel in, I stooped over the inert blond head and studied the Viking face that had already merged from its earlier solar vigor to a sort of lunar shadow of itself. It impressed me as a singularly beautiful face, with all its earlier coarsening animality thus removed. But the thing that sent a curdling of nerves eddying through my stooping body was the discovery that the gold-fringed eyelids had opened and that the eyes of immemorial blue were gazing languidly up into my face.

"This man isn't dead!" I cried out with more sharpness than I was at the moment aware of.

"He ban dead!" maintained Wickstram, pointing stubbornly to the blood that covered his cabin floor. There was, in truth, a shocking amount of it. But I could get a trace of a heart-throb under the barrel-like blond chest and I could hear a groan

when I turned him over to get some sort of temporary bandage clamped on the gaping wound.

"We've got to have a doctor here," I said as I stood up and dried my hands on a bunk-blanket, "and a police-officer!" But the captain of the *Lief Erickson*, apparently, had so suffered at the hands of interfering officials that the thought of his craft being invaded by others did not add to his peace of mind. He swore that he would cut loose and drop down the river, that he would throw the embarrassing blond body overboard, that he would head for the high seas alone, before he would see his ship invaded by the interfering minions of the law.

It was then that I thought of Pareso, of Pareso and his surgical skill, of his cunning, of the little two-cubic-centimeter syringe with its rubber tubing and its hollow needles. And without further loss of time I went careening up to Pareso's quarters and routed him from his bed, explaining everything as well as I could while he dressed and threw together the things that might be needed. And in scarcely less time than it takes to tell about it we

were once more in our one-horse fiacre rattling down to the wharf-end, where the women had disappeared and where, for a moment, I half feared the lawless Wickstram had indeed cut his pier-ropes and drifted away in the night.

But he was there, pacing his narrow deck and muttering in a language that I could not understand. Nor could I understand all that Pareso did when he stepped into that fetid cabin with the flooded floor. Yet in thirty seconds his coat was off and his sleeves were rolled up and he was hard at work on his patient, whose body he measured with a wondering glance, from time to time, and whose face he stared into, with an unnatural glitter deep in his own studiously narrowed eyes.

From the time of that first strange meeting, in fact, I was not unconscious of some mysterious attraction which the huge blond Norseman had for the swarthy-skinned Corsican. I was amazed at the patience and tenderness with which Pareso nursed the wounded Knutsson, just as I was compelled to marvel at the skill with which he restored the flaccid

body to health. Pareso, when his patient could be safely moved, even had the lethargic young Norseman carried up to his own quarters, where he watched him and fed him as carefully as a farmer feeds a prize bullock for a county fair.

It was not odd, accordingly, that a friendship should spring up between this oddly assorted couple, though there were times when Pareso's admiration for the other's physical dimensions filled me with a vague distrust. I thought, at first, that it was a common loneliness, a common solitariness of spirit, that had drawn these two men together. Still later I tried to argue that this affinity was based in some way on the appeal of opposites, since the one was so singularly the complement of the other, the huge Norwegian all flesh, muscle and sinew, and the gaunt Corsican all brain, nervous energy and inventiveness. But there was something beyond that, something which I could not at the time quite fathom.

"A magnificent animal, is he not?" Pareso would exclaim as he watched the passive blond

giant with the light glimmering on the tawny gold of his hair.

"I suppose so, if you like them stupid," I grudgingly admitted as I noticed that the pink was once more coming back into Knutsson's ridiculously smooth skin.

"Sometimes they are better so," proclaimed Pareso, following his own line of thought. Yet he was as patient as a mother with a child during those days when he was busy tutoring the placid-eyed giant in English. He watched him with a guarded eye, and convoyed him in his wanderings about the city, and exulted on his return of strength. And Knutsson himself was not without gratitude. But it was something more than friendship that existed between them. Pareso seemed to look on his new companion not merely as a man among men but more as an instrument for far-off and obscure ends. And there were even times when the attitude of Knutsson toward his benefactor seemed like that of a well-tamed animal toward his trainer.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ARROW OF GOLD

When the *Lief Erickson* burned at her pier through the explosion of an oil-stove and Wickstram and Lodbrog started homeward as steerage passengers on an Anchor liner, this same placid-eyed Knutsson showed no intention of going with them and betrayed no chagrin at their departure. He merely told me he had other plans. And more than once, as autumn deepened into winter, I found Pareso and his ward deep in a study of papers and charts which they put quietly away when I happened to intrude on their conferences. But I could not rid myself of the feeling that something was being conjured up, that mysterious enterprises were being considered.

I had my own troubles, at the time, for certain

changes on the *Herald* staff were making my work there none too satisfying either to my editor or to myself. And I did not see so much of Pareso and his companion as I might have wished. It was not that they deliberately shut me out from their little circle. They were exceptionally lonely in that city and were, I think, always glad to see me. But to be frank, I met a Scotch girl just out from Dumbarton that autumn and had a bit o' trouble wi' a skirt, as we used to put it in Glasgow. I don't know whether it was the soft gray of her eyes or the bonnie soft burr of her voice, but, at any rate, I got to thinking about her more than was good for me. I scrabbled through my day's work and neglected many a night assignment that I might take her out of an evening. But she was cool in the face of my ardency, and disapproved of me and my friends as improvident and too given to drink. And five weeks after I first lost my heart to her she quietly married a Glengarry man with a fat cattle-farm somewhere in western Ontario.

That both bowled me over like a nine-pin and

left a strange unrest in my heart. I'd had my fill of romance. I took from my desk the few frugal little notes she had sent me and tore them to shreds. I was about to tear up also the old Valiquette script that lay next to them, feeling the latter to be as foolishly apart from my workaday world as the former, when an unexpected call from Pareso took me to the door. Knutsson, he explained, had slipped away and lost himself somewhere in the city, and his keeper was anxious for my help in recovering the truant.

We found him eventually, thanks to my friendliness with the police. We found him late that night in an unsavory *estaminet* beyond the Bonsecours Market, bending silver half-dollars between his great fingers. He was much muddled with Holland gin and much given to music as we convoyed him back to his quarters. But until he was safely back in the fold Pareso made me think of a hen on a hot griddle, or a mare who had lost her foal. He not only breathed easier when he had the big blond once more under his wing, but he

opened a bottle of *cognac* for me and drank my health as his benefactor.

"Why should you worry about that empty-headed ash-blond?" I demanded, my tongue plainly a little loosened with the brandy I had swallowed.

"Ah, but I have use for him!" he proclaimed with an intensity which I attributed to the liquor beside him.

"Are you going to take him on tour?" I asked, a trifle mockingly, remembering the care with which that blond giant had been fed and groomed and hardened for unseen ends. For day by day the strange pair had been seen legging it over the neighboring hills; and with the coming of winter they took to snowshoes and tramped the blue-shadowed valleys and farmlands, ten hours at a time.

"There may be more in that than you imagine," was Pareso's somewhat enigmatic reply.

"Then I'd like to know about it," I admitted.

And Pareso looked at me with a questioning eye. But, on second thought, he hesitated at the brink of what he seemed about to say.

"It is a little enterprise of my own devising," he finally asserted, by way of escape.

I was as much surprised as Pareso, I think, by my next question.

"Couldn't I figure in it?" I found myself bold enough to inquire. But I was discouraged and unhappy and the restlessness of spring was in my blood.

"In what way are you qualified for an enterprise like mine?" demanded Pareso as he studied my person with that deep-set and oddly luminous eye of his.

"I can't answer that until I know the nature of your confounded enterprise," I countered, lightly enough, yet none too pleased at the touch of scorn on his face. "Just where are you bound for?"

He sat silent for a minute or two, weighing, apparently, either the expediency of speech or the actual words he hesitated to utter.

"When the trail is open," he finally told me, "I'm going to head for the Klondike, for the Klondike by the overland route from Edmonton."

"For gold?" I asked, in no way startled by a statement far from exceptional in those days of mad migrations.

"For gold—and for more than gold!" was his slightly retarded response.

"What more?" I inquired, watching him as he downed another glass of *cognac*.

"What business is that of yours?" he challenged as he pushed one of his unholy specimens *in vitro* farther over on his desk.

"I thought we were friends," I reminded him, with a head-nod toward the snoring Knutsson. And after another silence the man of science wagged his head slowly up and down.

"You are right," he said, with a kindlier light in his eye. And I watched him as he turned to a desk-drawer and from its depth drew out a small metal object that glittered bright in the lamplight. I saw, as he held it out to me, that it was an arrow-head. And when I took it up and examined it more closely I saw that this arrow-head was fashioned of solid gold.

"We are going where this came from!"

Yet the words, at the moment, carried no particular message to me. I remembered, for the first time, a story I had once heard from the lips of Andrew McCosh, a vague story about a half-breed in the Barren Grounds bringing down a wild-goose with an arrow-head of gold encysted in the breast-meat with which he later fed his hungry family. I had also heard of patients in a Mazatlan hospital, soldiers who had been wounded fighting the Yaqui Indians, having bullets of gold dug out of their battered bodies. But I had never been told of a people so primitive that they shafted and feathered two ounces of the precious metal to bring down either a teal-duck or a tribal enemy. I had never heard of such yarns, I inwardly protested, until I suddenly remembered about the Valiquette parchment which I carried at the moment in my pocket. And I'll never forget the small tingle of excitement that went needling up and down my backbone as I sensed even this shadowy confirmation of a story which I had accepted as phantasy.

"Can you read French?" I asked soberly enough. "Old French?"

I could hear Pareso's laugh as I reached into my pocket for those time-yellowed pages.

"I was born a Frenchman," he reminded me. "And in seven languages I am not altogether at sea."

"Then supposing you run your eye over this," I said as carelessly as I was able.

He took the parchment, with scant show of interest. He even glanced over his shoulder toward the sleeping Knutsson, before unfolding the pages.

I leaned back in my chair, watching Pareso.

He rubbed his temple, grunted once or twice, shifted in his seat and resumed his reading with what looked like a frown of annoyance on his face. Then, as he read, I saw his eyes grow hard with interest. He leaned closer over the script, looking more hawklike than ever as he deciphered the time-dulled words.

When he had finished he sat for a full five minutes, staring into space, without speaking or mov-

ing. Then he abstractedly opened a desk-drawer, took out what seemed to be a blue-paper map of his own, and placed it beside the abraded parchment chart attached to the Valiquette script. I could see his lungs fill with a deep breath as he studied and compared the two apparently inchoate designs.

"This is a gift from God!" he finally said. And he said it in a low and tremulous voice, more to himself than to me.

"On the contrary," I retorted with a wilful sort of quietness, "it came from a drunken ne'er-do-well who was a little off in his upper story!" And I told him, as briefly as I could, about Donald Christie and his foolish dreams of Arctic crusades.

There was a touch of impatience on Pareso's face as he sat studying me. Instead of deriding my flippancy, however, he once more reached into his desk-drawer and produced a wrist-bracelet of heavy gold, in the rough form of a serpent, and a crescent broad-ax inlaid with silver.

"Do you know anything about such matters?" he demanded as he placed them before me.

I had to acknowledge that I did not.

"That is Scandinavian metal-work of the tenth century," he proclaimed. "That ax was made about the time Ottar of Helgeland first rounded the North Cape and saw the midnight sun, before Eric the Red discovered Greenland and founded a Norse settlement on its shores. And that bracelet was once worn by Thera, the daughter of Olaf Halfdan, nearly four centuries before Columbus discovered America."

"Well," I still perversely maintained, "she must be good and dead by this time."

"I'm not so sure of that!" he said with a sudden and absurd clenching of his lean jaw. "She's waiting for us!"

"Waiting for us?" I echoed, staring at the *cognac* bottle to see how much of it he really had drunk. "I don't quite follow you."

"Of course you don't," derided Pareso. "But there's a point or two I'd like to make plain to you. I myself have hunted gold in Kamchatka and Anadir. I have gathered fossil ivory on the Taimyr

coast and lived on dog-flesh for a week in Liakhov. I have gone hungry in strange countries and have lived among people with strange ways. And at Chutoskoi, where I saved a fugitive seal-poacher from death, I came into possession of these pieces of metal and certain information as to their origin."

"Your story," I ventured, "must go back pretty far."

Pareso, I knew, was not a man of emotion. But in the lamplight I could see his eyes glow like coals.

"It goes back, sir, a thousand long years," he said with a fist-thump on the table-end. "It goes back to the time of Sigurd Blödoxe, who had been a follower of Eric the Red and the captain of a band of sea-pirates from the Island of Wollin, at the mouth of the Oder. It was this same Blödoxe who abducted Thera, the daughter of a certain Earl Olaf, a Viking chief of Hordoland, the Thera of such soft and queenly beauty that sagas were once written about her."

"Is this," I interrupted, "fairy-tale or fact?"

"It's fact," retorted Pareso. "It's as much his

tory as the discovery of this America of yours. But kindly permit me to proceed with my story. When Jarl Olaf and a younger prince named Haakon, presumably a prospective son-in-law of Olaf, started in pursuit of Blödoxe, the latter tried to put half the Atlantic between him and his enemies by fleeing to Iceland, known to the Norse of the ninth and tenth century, I understand, as Jöklarland. But Olaf and Haakon, it seems, came up with Blödoxe, and the abductor of Thera was compelled to go on to Greenland. Even there, however, he must have been menaced by his pursuers, for he again took to sea and again fled westward. He must, in fact, have dared the Northwest Passage. We know, at any rate, that he, together with his captive and crew, became lost somewhere along those Polar seas west of what you now call Baffin Land. And he got that far, remember, in nothing more than an oak-built skuta with a square-sail of woven wool and a bank of oars along a freeboard little higher than a modern life-boat's."

"And with the lady still aboard?" I questioned,

in an effort at levity that for some reason fell short.

"With the lady still aboard," replied Pareso, ignoring my sophomoric mockery. "But for all his brawn and bravery Blödoxe and his queenly blond captive could not find peace in the world. They threw off their pursuers, it is true, but in their New World they found new enemies. A hostile tribe of natives, whom we know from runic inscriptions only as the Fish-Eaters, opposed and captured this shipload of Norse invaders. There was a battle along some lonely Arctic coast, a battle apparently fought in falling snow, but a battle to the death. We have substantial reasons for believing that, while Blödoxe and Thera were taken prisoners every last man of that crew, that travel-worn and bloodstained crew, was put to death. But the chief of that tribe of yellow-haired and white-skinned natives, a chief called Ootah, seems to have regarded Thera as too beautiful to be butchered like a walrus. At any rate, he held back his followers and saved her from death, just as he saved Blödoxe,

obviously for future torture. Now, as far as we can learn, a change took place in Thera's attitude toward her abductor. Instead of hating the man who had carried her so far from her own home and people, she had mysteriously but most unmistakably grown to love him. For after Ootah, the better to hold his prisoners, had retreated from the coast and carried them up into the higher mountainous region toward the western sea, we find Blödoxe, in his extremity, secretly giving Thera a small ivory knife, with which to open a vein in her arm, should the worst come to the worst. So, when Ootah, after due pagan rites, was determined to take Thera as his wife, or as one of his wives, we find the unhappy daughter of Olaf secretly stealing to her lover, where they are found together by Ootah. That wily Fish-Eater, instead of thrusting a walrus-spear through the two of them, swallowed his big-chief's wounded pride and cunningly bottled up his natural pagan rage. He announced, instead, that he had undergone a change of heart. He proclaimed that since these two loved each other so deeply, they

should mate after the manner of man and woman unwaveringly attached to each other. And once mated, they should be free to seek their own ends and contemplate the fulness of their own happiness. The bride, proclaimed Ootah, should be given to her fated groom. But before that final rite, added the chief of the yellow-haired Fish-Eaters, she must be duly prepared for the bridal-bed, as befitted a queen of such beauty. And whatever else there is doubt about, there is little doubt about the fact that Thera was beautiful, beautiful, I suppose, as Helen of Troy was once beautiful, strangely desired of men, but leaving little happiness in the wake of her loveliness."

"And she was given to Blödoxe?" I prompted.

"She was given to him," pursued Pareso, "after Ootah's women had carried her up to a mountain-top temple, where, it was explained, her bridal-bath was to be prepared for her. But Thera must have suspected Ootah's treachery, for we know that the unhappy woman opened a vein with her little bone dagger, before she slipped into that final sleep of

unconsciousness. At any rate, when Blödoxe's bride was delivered to him, she was brought to his side embalmed in ice, bare and white and beautiful, but frozen in a slab of ice as solid as granite. Blödoxe, as we decipher the runes, went mad at that. He——"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, promptly smelling a rat. "Who was left to write those runes, if, as you say, all of Blödoxe's band were put to death?"

Pareso's opaque eye rested for a moment on my face.

"Who wrote the other runes found at times along your coasts from Umanak down to Vineland? Norse seamen were threading those waters, remember, five centuries before John Davis rediscovered Greenland, as you call it to-day. And it would be natural for compatriots of Blödoxe to pick up his story and leave some record of it. And according to those broken records Blödoxe went mad at this wanton murder of Thera. He burst the deer-thongs with which he was lashed, crushed

Ootah's skull with a snow ax and killed many men before he was finally captured and subdued. Then what was left of the Fish-Eaters, feeling that this strange blond woman had been at the root of all their troubles, unceremoniously committed that repugnant white body enclosed in ice to a glacial crevasse, where the eternal snows received it and swallowed it up. And Blödoxe they lashed to a cross of wood, high on a lonely moraine of ice, overlooking the crevasse, where, before he slowly froze to death, he might contemplate the grave of his lost bride."

I don't know how long silence reigned in that room after Pareso had stopped speaking. But I know I sat there for a ponderable stretch of time, doing my best to follow the drift of those strange and barbaric adventures.

"And so they were lost to the world," I heavily observed as I turned the heavy yellow bracelet over in the lamplight.

"You are a fool!" cried Pareso, with quite unexpected vigor.

"I'm at least a sober one," I countered, resenting that open note of scorn.

"She was lost to the world," proclaimed Pareso, pointing to his glassful of shriveled wheat-kernels, "the same as that mummy-wheat was lost to the world when it was committed to an Egyptian sarcophagus in the Valley of Tombs, two thousand years ago."

"I don't quite follow you," I said, oppressed by the heat of the room.

"The grave," intoned Pareso, "has been known to deliver its dead."

I did my best to grope toward some undefined goal which he had already reached.

"Great God!" I gasped at last, "you don't mean you're going to mine a glacier for a dead woman's body?"

"There is no need for that," said Pareso, his lank forefinger resting on the yellowed parchment before him. "That task, apparently, has already been performed by the slow processes of time. And death does not always corrupt!"

"But I don't understand," I began.

"You will," asserted the swarthy man at the table, his forefinger tapping along a portion of the abraded parchment map, "when you come with me across those mountains."

"Ah, then I'm to be one of you?" I inquired as Knutsson, sitting up on his bed, began a guttural muttering in the half-light. He had been sweating, apparently, in the heat of the room, and I could see the high lights on his columnar blond neck as he blinked urbanely out at us from his shadowy corner.

"There will be the three of us," said Pareso. And he said it in a voice that had both a touch of finality and a note of mastery in its quietness.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OVERLAND ROUTE

It was five weeks later that an oddly assorted trio arrived at Edmonton, to begin their long trek toward the Circle. As Edmonton was then the jumping-off place for hordes of prospectors bound overland for the Yukon, our arrival at the busy little wooden town on the Saskatchewan did not attract the attention it might otherwise have done. There were enough strange figures striking out from the rail-head and fighting their way northward that spring.

There were, in fact, far too many of them, for word had already come down of outfits stranded along the trail, of pack-horses dying for want of feed, of camps without grub, of telltale wooden grave-crosses along the way, of tenderfeet drowning

in rapids, of chechachos boiling their dog-harness to keep body and soul together, of destitution and disaster and misery sufficient to head off any migration except one with gold as its motive. For where gold is concerned man is no longer a reasoning being. Indeed, the Northwest Mounted Police were already examining and passing on each outfit as it set forth, turning back those not properly organized or adequately equipped, since the bones of enough incompetents were already bleaching along that Via Doloroso. They were also announcing that no further passengers could be accepted by the Mackenzie River steamers, the shallow-draught boats in operation for their brief season on the three divisions of that waterway being booked up to their last square inch of space.

This made a serious hitch in our plans and held us up for almost a month. When Pareso finally decided to go in by way of the Peace and the Pelly, it meant that pack-horses had to be secured, that extra supplies had to be rounded up, and that guides and trailers had to be hired at a time when

guides and trailers were by no means easy to find. We finally obtained what seemed to be a promising head-guide in one Louis Pepin, a half-breed whose brother, we were told, had traveled over the same route with Inspector Moodie of the Mounted Police a year or two before. But trouble arose again with the police, who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, were suspicious of Pareso and especially determined on an inspection of his supplies. And Pareso had his reasons why they should not nose too closely into the nature of all those supplies.

There was one sturdy and damnably clumsy duffel-bag in particular, water-proofed and double-locked and carefully watched, and precisely what it held was known only to its owner. In it, it is true, I had at one time or another glimpsed strange paraphernalia, surgical instruments and bottles and phials carefully padded against concussion, a bag or two of highly colored beads, trade candy and needles, a box of cheap German mouth-organs and trade watches, a bundle of fire-works wrapped in cotton, a first-aid kit, rubber tubing, a microscope

and slides, a couple of extra revolvers, tins of chemicals, one of which I knew to be labeled phosphorus.

There were other unexpected things in that treasure-bag, as I learned later on, such as matches and cigarettes and a box of brass-framed trade mirrors no bigger than a silver dollar and a gross of highly colored silk handkerchiefs and a half-liter of *cognac* and a package or two of Oolong tea—all of which were guarded and preserved and kept intact as meticulously as though they were diamonds from Kimberley. Even when we went hungry, and starvation stalked us along our lonely trails, Pareso would permit no violation of that sacred jumble of curiosities.

Beyond that sealed treasure-bag, however, we were exceptionally well equipped with firearms, carefully concealed in an extra sleeping-bag made of ground-hog fur, our blankets and camp-utensils were of the best, and our food supply was as compact and complete as any I had ever seen assembled for northern "tripping," with an emergency

ration of one hundred pounds of the best pemmican. I can perhaps best illustrate the thoroughness of Pareso's preparations by pointing out that instead of burdening ourselves down with sugar, we carried, for sweetening purposes, a small but adequate supply of saccharine.

The police, however, were still mysteriously reluctant to authorize our embarkation and time was an obvious factor in the situation. So, rather than see June slip away without any action, we took French leave of the Mounties, and an hour after midnight set out quietly on our own accord. Even in that latitude the June night held only two or three hours of darkness, and it was not long before we could see ourselves trekking through a pleasant country of rich black loam nicely wooded with clumps of poplar. Knutsson, light-hearted at being finally on the way, sang as he went.

Farther on the country became more hilly, with a sandy soil covered with park-like clumps of jack-pine, and as the weather was clear we spent our first night sleeping in the open beside a small lake

where we rolled up in our blankets and for a while were kept awake by the loons sporting on the near-by water and the prairie-wolves howling from the distant scrub. But the stars in the green-blue dome above us seemed to shine down with a benignant aloofness; our start had every appearance of being an auspicious one, and it was very pleasant to lie there and watch the faint rose and orange fringe of the Aurora Borealis that floated above the Circle, the Circle toward which we were bound. And all looked fair as two days later we arrived at Athabasca Landing, a busy enough settlement of eight or ten log buildings and a Hudson Bay Company warehouse out of which went the supplies for that northern hinterland and into which drifted back the furs of that subarctic wilderness.

While I was leisurely admiring the Athabasca as one of the greatest rivers in America an Indian friend of Pepin quietly approached that *métis* and informed him that a Mounted Policeman at the landing had been instructed to stop our party before it could embark. At the moment, happily,

this corporal was a few miles up the river looking into the horse-stealing activities of an unruly Blackfoot. So for the second time, without ceremony or hesitation, we slipped quietly away into the wilderness, eschewing the haunts of man. We decided to slip over the edge of Nowhere and lose ourselves in that enduring and doubly-welcomed desolation. We headed for Fort St. John, on the Peace River, by way of Lac Ste. Anne, crossing the Athabasca at its junction with the McLeod. We had, naturally enough, our minor mishaps on the way, dousings in unexpectedly deep fords, bruises and cuts from slides down coulée-banks and falls in heavy timber, infected fly-bites, and sore feet from wet muskeg-travel. Those, however, were all accepted as part of the game. It was not until Pareso broke a small bone in his foot, two days out of St. John, that the first real ill-luck befell us.

It did not seem a serious break, at first, and I considered Pareso unusually clever when he coolly reduced the fracture and afterward made a cast of clay and kiln-baked it into brick. But the pain and

the inflammation increased until we were compelled to lay up in camp. We remained there for seven weeks, all told. Pepin and his breed packers deserted us, in the meantime, not because of so much enforced idleness but more because both the Indian and the *métis* is chronically averse to taking long journeys out of his own district. Once we were on our way again we picked up other Indians as we went, but as trackers and packers they were indolent and as guides they were usually inaccurate. We also picked up a fresh horse, here and there, to replace those lost by drowning or by straying away when not properly hobbled. And when we met a pack-train heading back to the landing, persuaded that it was too late to try to get through to the Klondike that season, we held a council of war and discussed our chances in going on. I knew well enough what a winter in the northern bush would mean, and was all for turning back and making another try in the spring, by the proved route of Skagway and the White Horse Pass. But that was a gateway both too public and too well policed to

suit Pareso, who had Knutsson to back him up in the plan of pushing on, getting dog-teams when the snow came, and not showing the white feather after going as far as we had.

So, making a virtue of a necessity, I swung over to their side, and we once more headed into the unknown. Once more we faced the old story of muskeg and spruce and jack-pine ridges, endlessly reproducing themselves. Sometimes we missed the trail, and sometimes we had to make our own trail as we went. When feed ran out and the going grew too rough for pack-train, we shot our horses and dried and smoked the meat for extra rations. We bought canoes from a run-down encampment of Dog-Rib Indians and pounded down one contentious stream only to pole and track up another. And when our canoes were battered and broken beyond repair we built rafts and committed ourselves to a river which I claimed was the Parsnip but which Pareso protested was the Sagosun. When that river bore too stubbornly westward we were compelled to leave it and strike northward and face once more

the hardship of muskeg and hog-back and timber and rock. The days shortened and the nights grew colder, and now and then snow would fall, and we were troubled for a time by a scattering band of timber-wolves that hung at our heels.

"*Jamais arrière!*" the gaunt-limbed Pareso had the habit of saying, when things looked darkest.

Then came the freeze-up, changing our world almost overnight and compelling us to call a halt until we could be equipped for winter traveling. We laid up in a valley where, providentially, there were conies and white-fish in the near-by waters and moose and deer and bear enough in the surrounding timber to keep us supplied with food. In that same valley, from the last Indian encampment or any size we were to encounter, we bartered for two dog-teams and snow-shoes and moccasins and enough squaw-sewn fur garments to keep warmth in our bodies. And on we floundered again, heading deeper and deeper into the unknown North. Pareso, whose strength and endurance was a matter of wonder to me, claimed stoutly enough that he

retained a working knowledge of both our direction and our destination. But there were days when I had my doubts about this. And the isolation and the hardships and the strangeness of the country we were traversing began to tell on our nerves.

I no longer kept track of time. I began to feel like a man who has died and changed his world, as the Chinese put it. Everything about me seemed to take on a touch of unreality. Sometimes the mountains would close in on us and sometimes we would find ourselves on a windy plateau without a sign of life or a promise of growth. Sometimes we hacked our way through tangled timber and sometimes we broke trail over frozen muskeg and wind-swept tundra cushioned with moss topped by a meringue of drift-snow. Sometimes we encountered caribou and sheep, and once, after mounting a wooded slope and staring over a rock-face, I looked down on a herd of musk-ox, shaggy and sullen in the driving snow, impressing me as I stared at them as something prehistoric, as belonging to another age, as out of place before my startled twentieth-

century eyes as might have been a group of mastodons shuffling along under the lip of a mountain glacier. And when Knutsson came clambering up to my side, Knutsson in ragged furs and tawny gold hair that had grown half-way down to his shoulders and a beard of deeper gold on his unshaved face, I felt that he too truly belonged to some rougher and earlier age.

That sense of unreality in everything about me did not diminish with the lengthening of the days and the passing of the winter. For by this time I knew, as well as Pareso himself knew, that we were all hopelessly lost in that northern wilderness. It was that knowledge, I think, even more than the meagerness of our food and the monotony of our labor, that rankled in my heart and soured my mind. I felt that I had been betrayed, that I had been carried forth on a fool's errand, and that the ignominy of our end would be well in keeping with the craziness of our judgment. That inner bitterness even made me impervious to the more trivial ills of the body, for when I fell and cut my shoulder

on a rock-fang I made no effort to cleanse or tend the wound. Through some strange perversity of spirit, in fact, I exulted in this additional pain that crowned the duller discomfort of the gall-sores from the heavy pack I still had to carry.

Pareso, whatever his own thoughts, was the one member of the party who never considered failure and never actually surrendered to despair. "*Jamais arrière!*" was his stubbornly repeated cry. And there still remained, to me, something of the magician about him. When the giant-framed Knutsson fell, in his weakened condition, headlong into a stream we were fording, and, held down by his pack, was dragged ashore with every aspect of a drowned man, it was Pareso who unlocked his duffel-bag and produced a collapsible pulmotor and worked over the unconscious blond figure and brought the breath of life back into the mumbling big body, just as it had been Pareso who, when my feet were frozen while trailing wet-legged over one of the mountain passes, carefully took the frost from the benumbed flesh and with his hypodermic

needle forced some strange drug in under the darkened skin and both soothed away the pain and prevented the gangrene that customarily follows on such an affliction. And it was Pareso, when our rations ran low and game was no longer in range, who boiled our extra moccasins and tump-lines and kept us alive until by sheer good luck the shaking Knutsson brought down a musk-ox and once more gave us meat.

I don't remember as much about the last few weeks of that journey as I should. A great deal of it seems like a dream, a prolonged nightmare shot through with miseries too sharp to be mere hallucination and daily perils too acute to be entirely forgotten. I was disturbed in mind and wretched in body, soured with discontent, poisoned with the accumulated toxins of fatigue, and continuously feverish, I suspect, from the infected wound on my shoulder. There was one day, I know, when they laid up for me, and another day when Knutsson carried me along on his great heaving shoulders.

It was then that a strange thing happened. I

seem to see it mistily, as through a veil, for the fever was still on me, and fantasy and fact had the trick of tangling themselves up in my brain. But as we dropped down into a valley overshadowed by a mountain-peak that belched smoke we stumbled on signs of life, a bit of cleared timberland, a pile of stove-wood, a clear-cut trail along a winding river-bank. And there, where we'd dreamed ourselves a hundred miles from a human being, we came on a well-built chalet of logs and a tall and saturnine stranger who stood in his doorway studying us with silent and unmistakable hostility. He even declined any response to our salutations, until Pareso, running through his gamut of languages, addressed him in what I afterward learned to be Russian. Even then there was small unbending on the part of this big and sullen-eyed misanthrope who had hidden himself away in those lonely northern hills. But when he was told that we had a sick man in our party and that it would be inhuman to deny us help, we were tardily and none too graciously admitted to that unexpectedly comfortable

wilderness chalet. I was put to bed on an improvised bunk in a corner of the main room and during the week I was taken care of there I both dreamed strange things in my feverish sleep and saw even stranger things during my hours of wakefulness. Our host, I found, called himself Shashkov and claimed to be a fur-trader from Yakutsk. He had hidden away from the world, I further gathered, because of an affair of honor, which he cared to discuss with neither his friends nor his enemies. He also claimed to be quite alone there. But on that point he was an arrant liar.

From the first, in fact, I had been oppressed by an air of secrecy, of something hidden from view, of whisperings behind closed doors. It was my fever, I tried to tell myself, but I could not entirely rid myself of the impression of a presence carefully withheld from outsiders. And one night when I was hot and restless I got out of bed and wandered aimlessly about looking for water. I opened a door in my wanderings and groped through a small room carpeted with bearskins and opened a second

door that showed a larger room lighted by a tall candle. And there, asleep on a pallet draped with soft furs, was a woman.

Her skin was smooth and white and her hair was of burning gold and she seemed to me so lovely, as I stood staring at her, that my feverish heart pounded faster than ever. She was not young, I surmised, but still in the full flower of her womanhood. And about her was something so ample and queenly that my knees quaked and I tried to tell myself that I was dreaming. But I could see her sigh and turn in her sleep. And I knew she was alive and breathing. I knew that even after I had crept back to my wall-side bunk, where I lay forgetful of my thirst and waiting for morning.

When Pareso appeared from the outer log building where he and Knutsson were quartered I motioned for him to come closer.

"There's a woman in this house," I said in a husky whisper.

"I know it," he said, with a glance over his shoulder, as though afraid of being overheard.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," acknowledged Pareso. "This Shashkov is a great liar. He knows little about furs. And he stands like a soldier. He was an officer once, mark my words, or I never saw the Imperial Guard on parade."

Nothing more was said, for Shashkov himself came into the room. But his secret went up in thin smoke, the next night, when Knutsson himself blundered into the forbidden room and the hidden woman screamed with fright at that towering blond figure with the flame-colored beard.

There was almost murder done that night, I'm afraid, for by the time Pareso got to the scene Shashkov was going at poor Knutsson, hammer and tongs, with a wolf-knife half as long as his arm. But the beans were spilled, of course. Shashkov could no longer stick to his story about being there alone in the wilderness. And it was no longer necessary for him to keep the woman hidden away. He worked hard enough, however, to keep her in the background.

But that woman wasn't the type to be overlooked. She was too tall and queenly, too spectacularly superb, to be lightly passed by. Her name was Olga, Olga Shashkov, and our host claimed her to be his wife, though a wife guilty of that for which wives are seldom forgiven. Yet the one thing that puzzled me was her silence, her sustained air of remoteness. I thought, at first, that she was almost without the gift of speech. But I found her, later on, talking with Pareso in Russian, talking in a slow and abstracted manner that made me think of a half-awakened child. He was very gentle and patient with her, and she was childlike, too, in her response to that unexpected kindness. I didn't know it until afterward, but she was an amnesiac. Pareso, who examined her, later explained that she had been treated brutally, that a depression of the skull from some cowardly blow had taken away most of her memory. He also expressed the opinion that an operation could relieve the pressure on the brain and probably bring the woman back to normal.

But all talk and thought about such things ab-

ruptly ended. I remember, through my mists of fever, a noisy argument between Shashkov and Pareso, and a still noisier scene the following night when that huge and hot-blooded husband encountered Olga Shashkov and Pareso together.

Pareso claimed it was Knutsson who stood at the root of the trouble, but of that I have no means of judging. At any rate there was a fight, a medley of shouts and blows that ended with the sudden bark of a revolver. Pareso came to me and said that we had to get out, that we were hitting the trail again. I seem to remember the strange blond woman weeping and begging Pareso to be taken along with him. This, however, he later denied, though I nursed a vague impression, once we were on our way again, of Pareso's occasional disappearances from our midst and his silent and unexplained returns. Once, in the northern dusk, I even thought I saw that tall blond figure, following along in our trail. But I was sick and unsettled in mind, those days, and I wrote it down, in the end, to the fancy of a slightly fevered brain.

For we had troubles enough of our own as we went battling on, day by day, toward our half-forgotten goal, trekking on through rock and muskeg, through tumultuous unknown waters, through lonely chains of northern lakes and ghostlike streams that tore between ghostlike rocks. We forged ahead, through cushioned tundra and windy upland passes, through driving rain and mosquito-haunted valleys where the sound of our own voices echoed strangely along the thinly timbered slopes. It seemed to me that all life had become merely one endless trek, that we had gone on in that way for years and years, that we must continue to go on in that way for years and years to come, that we would be crawling poleward through those sullen latitudes until the end of time, that we were a group of madmen fretting and fighting our way through a wilderness that was without limits and without pity for that puny creature known as man. But still we went on. The thing became automatic, in time, and my arms could wield a raft-pole when my mind was asleep and my legs could carry me and my

pack over broken portages when dream and reality became strangely muddled in my drowsy brain. Yet still we struggled forward. I no longer nursed any sense of direction or destination. I lost all track of time. I became a ghost in a world of ghosts. Sleep resolved itself into merely a slightly deeper lethargy in a timeless lethargy of labor and sweat and weariness. And I grew indifferent as to how the whole thing would end, indifferent even as to how soon it would end.

Clouded as my brain may have been, I was vaguely conscious of a change in Pareso. There was a new grimness in his passion to get on, a new nervous intentness that more than once reminded me of a pointer winding water. I don't know by what signs, or on what grounds, his stubborn but sadly dwindled faith had been restored to him. I could see, however, a change in his manner and a new energy in his movements.

He had need enough of that energy. For on this stretch of the journey we seemed to be climbing, always climbing. Our last compass had long

since been lost in a rapids, but as we headed northwest by north we appeared to be making our way into an engulfing arc of mountainous peaks that bit like white fangs into the thin rind of the Arctic sunsets. And we seemed confronted by the ultimate foolishness of it all when, after a day of incredibly rough going, we found ourselves face to face with an impregnable rock-wall, a series of towering cliffs crowned with glacial ice that completely blocked our way.

I was even able to wring a grim satisfaction out of this *impasse*, until I discovered that Knutsson and Pareso were building a raft on the edge of a turbulent blue-green canyon-stream that twined like a snake through the eroded rock. It was a small raft, for wood was scarce. But we had little left to burden it with, beyond our own tired bodies and Pareso's precious duffel-bag.

"Where will this take us to?" I demanded as we pushed off and were promptly in the clutch of the current.

"God only knows!" was Pareso's answer as he

drew his bag closer to where he crouched on those unsteady timbers. As our stream curled like a boa-constrictor between its smooth malachite-green walls the banks narrowed and we found ourselves in a deeper canyon, a boiling canyon to which we were as definitely committed as though we had flung ourselves over a cliffside. Whatever lay before us, there was now no escape from it. And as we raced on, helpless, with the mist in our faces and the echoing roar of water in our ears and the narrow walls still deepening on either side of us, I felt that we were indeed reaching the end of our long trail.

It would be anything but a happy end, I could foresee, yet I remained singularly undisturbed by the thought that my earthly troubles were about to be over. I did not even cry out as the narrowing slit of light above us closed in and suddenly became a tunnel-roof, as this roof dipped and lowered over our racing heads, as our crouching shoulders brushed it as we were swept along. But when all space ended abruptly, and our river seemed to sink

bodily down through solid rock, and we were drawn into that singing black vortex, I instinctively clung to the first thing that offered. I thought, in my bewilderment, that my arms were clasped about one of the logs of the raft, broken free. Then, as I vainly fought for a breath of air, I thought it was Knutsson's huge leg to which I was clamped. Then as I found myself vomited out into light again I realized that I was clinging to the duffel-bag and floating, numbed and bruised, along a ripple of glacial-green water that spread fanlike over a series of widening gravel-bars and went singing down the side of a singularly green valley.

It was the huge Knutsson who waded knee-deep into the shallows and dragged me and the bag from the water, for I was too shaken and sick to make further effort to save myself. Then he went after Pareso, who lay half in and half out of the sucking green eddies, and carried him up a gentle moss-slope, where we all lay shivering and coughing the water from our lungs.

I rather thought, at first, that I had died and gone to a heaven which I in no wise merited or

expected, and I was perfectly content to lie there and luxuriate in my vague consciousness of escape from cold and violence. But I was wakened by a cry from Knutsson's lips as he stood above us, pointing out over the soft wide valley that seemed etherealized by the thinning gold of the evening light. And the only thing in any way familiar about that spectral landscape was the Chinook Arch spanning its tranquil evening sky.

"Smoke!" said Knutsson as he stared out over the soft green lowlands beyond which again we could see the glitter of the encircling remote mountaintops.

"That means we can get grub," I said as I sat up, remembering my hunger. But I was startled by a laugh from Pareso. It was not a loud laugh. Yet there was something infinitely scornful and unedging about it, for all its undertone of triumph.

"You'll get more than grub here," he said as he dragged himself closer to his dripping bag and hung an arm over it as one hangs an arm over an animal greatly loved.

"Well, grub's enough for me, just now," I

moodily retorted, resentful, I suppose, of the other's superior tone.

"Look," Pareso cried as he started up and swung Knutsson about to where the now lowering sun shone bright on a scattering of points and domes and small minarets that glowed through the horizon-blue of the lower valley-bowl. "He's talking about grub when he's face to face with more gold than ever came out of the Indies!"

I thought I discerned movement through those far-off valley mists, flashes of gilt that came and went, gleams of fire that faded almost as soon as they were born.

Yet it was Pareso's face, standing there with a hungry look in his cavernous eyes and a sourly triumphant smile about his thin lips, that finally brought the truth of the matter home to me.

"What is it we've found?" I asked.

"We've found our Lost Tribe!" proclaimed Pareso as he stood with his hands folded over his chest, staring off into the distance where lay that strange kingdom he had traveled so far to conquer.

CHAPTER FOUR

WE ENCOUNTER A WOMAN

WE FARED better, that first night in our new surroundings, than three such castaways might have expected. In searching through those volcanic rock-ridges for a ravine where we might build a fire without observation from the valley below, I stumbled on a small series of hot springs that were as welcome as a box-stove to a winter traveler. Such things, I was to learn later, were no uncommon occurrence in that particular valley or in Alaska as a whole, and had not a little to do with the temperateness of local climates, though that first discovery of steaming water boiling up out of rock-fissures rather took my breath away. Then, thanks to Pareso's treasured bag, from which its owner extracted two Smith and Wesson revolvers, Knuts-

son was able to venture slightly lower down the valley-slope, where he shot a mountain sheep. When he returned with the animal over his shoulder he reported that there were many sheep in the lower levels and that, instead of fleeing at his approach, they gave every evidence of being domesticated.

So we dined prodigiously, if simply, that night on spitted sheep-meat roasted over our camp-fire coals. And having eaten our fill, we flung ourselves on the warm rock-bed of that skyey retreat and slept the sleep of utter weariness.

Hard as that bed was, the sun had swung high in the heavens before I opened my eyes and lay staring up at a sky of the palest robin's-egg blue. Six paces away from me sat Pareso, contentedly munching on a charred shank-bone of mutton, leisurely studying one of his tattered charts as he ate. And at one of the more tempered pools crowned with mist in the limpid morning air Knutsson was bathing his huge naked body, emitting small animal-like grunts of satisfaction as he laved in that tepid water.

It made a scene oddly intimate and commonplace for a setting so strange, and I sat up, still a little bewildered, staring about me. I even scrambled to my feet and mounted a higher rock-ledge where I could see the wide green bowl of the valley with a light fleece of amethyst-tinted fog still covering its center and a lingering morning mist still bending the feather-grass and willows along the nearer slopes. It looked so strangely peaceful, so unexpected and Edenic in its softer contour of verdure and color, that I climbed still higher to get a better view of that wide amphitheater of misted valley-land so mysteriously shut in by its guardian circle of snow-capped mountains.

"You might be seen up there," Pareso warned me. "And I don't want that until we are ready for them."

"Who might see me?" I asked as I squatted beside him and reached for some of the browned rib-meat that lay on the rocks between us.

"These polar blonds that we're going to king it over for a time," was his indifferent enough answer

as he searched in his duffel-bag and brought out a pair of binoculars in a worn leather case.

"Are they blonds?" I asked, watching him as he opened the glasses and tested them.

"Unless our prophet of four centuries ago is a liar, they are," asserted Pareso. "And if a long-range study is going to help us, I'm soon going to tell you more about them."

He left me there and climbed cautiously up to a rocky pinnacle, where he perched as motionless as an eagle, patiently studying the far-rolling landscape that lay beneath him. What he saw there to hold him so intent I could not tell. But even with the naked eye I could decipher, where practically the last of the morning mist had rolled away, a huddled miniature of roofs overhung with a thin gray crown of smoke. I could not be sure whether these were teepees or topicks or igloos. But the magnitude of the settlement amazed me. And I noticed that these homes, if homes they were, stood clustered along a series of converging trails that met in a concourse where a more imposing building flashed

bright in the slanting sunlight. I could even make out faint signs of movement, in the shimmer of the morning sun on bright metal in transit from point to point, the flowing gray of what seemed to be a flock of sheep moving slowly out toward the upper hills where I watched.

So alluring was that prospect and so curious was my mind as to the meaning of those far-off movements that I quietly shifted along a lateral rock-ridge and crept away, until I was well out of sight of my companions. Then I even more cautiously descended the broken slopes, making it a point to keep well under cover. I don't know what influences were at work to produce the impression that began to creep over me, but I felt as I went that I was pioneering into a strange country where no man of my own world had ever before ventured. And that persistent illusion of other-worldness seemed complete when I emerged from a sheltering arroyo and traversed a whispering grove of poplars and came face to face with a slender-bodied dryad studying a splotch of blood on the greensward.

Her hair, plaited Indian-fashion about her head, was a golden-yellow, the color of ripened wheat. She stood little taller than a well-grown child, yet there were lines of womanly development about the meditative and lithely poised body. She wore, I noticed, a sleeveless smock of roughly woven homespun, low in the neck and laced with thongs of dyed leather up the front. This smock came scarcely to her knees, and on her feet were gold-beaded moccasins of tanned hide. She was fair of skin for a person presumably of Eskimo or Indian origin. That skin of hers, in fact, was of a smooth and dusky gardenia tint, too warm in tone to be called ivory, too touched with sun and weather to be called pallid. And it wasn't until she looked up at me, and stared into my face with startled round eyes, that I noticed the blue of her own eyes, the quiet and misty blue of the northern zenith on an afternoon of Indian summer.

She stood there staring at me, more in wonder than in fear; and rather than frighten her away I shrank back, with the timeless and instinctive peace-

gesture of the upraised hand with the palm outward.

She, oddly enough, repeated that gesture, though her thoughts did not seem centered on the movement. Yet I was troubled when with her other hand she pointed mutely to the bloodstains on the grass.

"I'm sorry about that," I said, remembering Knutsson's slaughtered sheep. Although she obviously could not understand my words, I think she realized the contriteness of my attitude, for I wanted her neither to hate me nor to be afraid of me. It was, I suppose, so many long months in the wilderness, so many nights and days without the softening vision of a woman along our trails, that threw an unnatural glamour about that tense small figure with the heavy bands of gold on wrists and ankles and the yellow gleam of gold in the tunic-embroidering. But she looked wonderful to me.

She was gone, however, before I could speak again. She was scuttering down the broken hill-slopes with the speed of a child who has seen a

ghost, never once looking back until she was under the cover of a little congress of white birches. To go after her, I knew, would be foolish and futile. And although I decided to say nothing about that encounter to Pareso and Knutsson, for obvious reasons, it gave me a great deal to think about as I made my way back to our hilltop retreat.

There, however, I found Knutsson busy shaving himself and trimming his ragged locks in front of a broken pocket-mirror and Pareso occupied in re-assembling the contents of his precious duffel-bag. He somewhat surprised me by handing out to me a second revolver and a box of cartridges, with the warning that the firearm was to be used only in case of emergency and that under no circumstances was the ammunition to be wasted. He even passed me a needle and thread and a band of buckskin and showed me how to fashion a holster for carrying the six-shooter at my side. He himself, I noticed, had reclaimed the other revolver from Knutsson and carried it thrust in a belt-loop at his waist. And when, later in the day, he ventured down the

mountainside to make further observations of his own, I occupied myself in bathing and mending and washing my clothing and shaving with the party razor on which Knutsson's stubble had left none too keen an edge.

Knutsson himself, while I was thus engaged, must have slipped quietly away from our camping-place, for when I looked about for him he was nowhere in sight. All thought on the matter, however, was interrupted by a hoarse grunt of triumph behind me as the great form of Knutsson came lumbering up the trail.

But what froze me to the spot was the discovery that he did not come alone. For flung over his great shoulder was a slender figure in a homespun tunic embroidered with gold.

I could see Knutsson swing her about and hold her at arm's length, with her back against the flat rock behind her. He held her there, his eyes alight with a sort of animal exultation, a smile of triumph on his laughing red lips. And the captured girl, cringing back against the rock-wall, stared at him

as I have seen a fluttered bird stare at a coiled snake. In her wide eyes I could see terror and wonder and awe, all tangled up together. Her body shook as one great blond hand, caressing the smooth skin of her forearm, moved appropriatingly up to the slope of her rounded shoulder.

I felt the blood sing in my ears as I sprang toward Knutsson and tried to tear his clutch from that shrinking figure.

"Let her go, you damned bullock!"

But I was powerless before his strength. The Berserker laughter was still on his face as he brushed me aside, with one sweep of his huge paw.

"This is my woman!" he proclaimed. But as he drew the writhing girl closer toward him I felt something snap at the base of my brain.

"Stop!" I shouted, with my revolver out and the point of its barrel pressed in against his heaving side. "Stop, or I'll put a hole through you where you stand!"

He twisted about and looked at the firearm. Then his slightly bewildered eye studied my face.

"She's mine!" he said with a protesting sort of sullenness, shifting away from the barrel-end against his ribs.

"Quick," I retorted, shaking a little with the feeling that was too much for me. "Get your hands off her or you'll get a bullet in your heart."

He turned slowly about and saw the revolver leveled at his breast, and saw, I suppose, also the hot determination on my face. There was no answering rage in his opaque blue eyes. It was more protest and indignation at an injustice as unexpected as it was unreasonable. He even began to argue about it, in his full-throated gutturals, but I wasn't interested, at the moment, in what he had to say. For I could see that the native girl, with even deeper wonder in her eyes, was edging silently along the rock-wall behind him. And once she saw the way open for her she circled about and ran. She ran down the broken slopes as light-footed as a fawn.

I started after her, and Knutsson, for reasons best known to himself, followed me. We were both

considerably surprised, I think, when Pareso appeared from behind one of the lateral wooded ridges in front of us. He too tried to head off the flying figure, but the girl in the homespun tunic swerved and sped past him. The next moment I saw him wheel about, whip his revolver from its belt-loop, and level it at the flying figure.

I was beside him before he could be sure of his aim, and as he pulled the trigger I struck at his outstretched arm. The weapon went off, the bullet plowing into the soil not ten paces from where we stood. But the flying slender figure kept on its way. And Pareso stood there with something oddly akin to hate on his swarthy face as he stared at me.

"You fool!" he cried. "Oh, you fool, to spoil everything like that!"

"I couldn't see you murder that woman," I contended as I stared down the valley into which she had already disappeared.

"I suppose you prefer to see that happen to the three of us," he said as he strode back and forth. "There are nearly two thousand men down there in

her tribe, and how long will it take, do you suppose, for an empty-headed woman to tell them what she's seen?"

"Then talk to Knutsson about that," I cried out. "He brought her up here!"

But Pareso, apparently, had his reasons for not being quite so outspoken with his pampered big Swede.

"It's her getting away alive that counts," he asserted as he swung back to me. "She should have been shot down in her tracks."

"What good would that have done?" I demanded, rankling with the cold injustice of such a course.

"It would have given us a chance to get ready for an ordeal that's going to be none too pleasant when it comes. Do you realize we've got to face that tribe and cow them into accepting us as their superiors? Do you realize that one false play will say good night to this excursion and give us exactly what your old friend Valiquette got?"

I knew well enough what he meant. But I con-

sidered it a bad beginning to start with a woman's blood on our hands; and I told him so.

"We will have a great deal more than the blood of a sheep-herding squaw on our hands before we're through with this job," was Pareso's still embittered response. "And the only thing for us to do now is to get busy. For between now and sunrise we've got to give a brand-new god to those blond Eskimos and get the whole fire-eating tribe so they'll sip out of our hand!"

"And who's the god you're going to give them?" I asked as I followed Pareso up to our hill-camp.

"Knutsson, of course," was his curt reply.

I turned and studied the huge blond Swede as he scraped about the fire-ashes for a remaining morsel or two of grilled mutton.

"And supposing they don't accept your tuppeny tin god?" I inquired as I watched Pareso unlock his precious duffel-bag once more.

"It's my business to make them," retorted that squat and swarthy figure.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRE-GOD ASSERTS HIMSELF

It wasn't long before I had a fairly comprehensive grasp of Pareso's intentions. His long-distance study of the valley had persuaded him that the larger building at the center of the concourse was a tribal temple, since he had twice seen groups of figures going through a sort of drill before a platform on which stood some bright but undecipherable metal object of worship. Yet there was a second and more remote temple, apparently, for he had observed streams of ant-like figures going up the farther mountain-slope and returning again from some spot beyond the range of his glass.

Our descent from the hills, however, could not be undertaken until sleep had fallen over the settlement and the brief northern darkness had

come to shroud our approach. The hour after midnight, too, was deemed the most suitable for the exploitation of Pareso's supernatural effects. So it became necessary for us, even before comparative darkness covered our broken hill-slopes, to work our way down toward the lower levels, where we advanced like scouts in hostile territory. Yet my heart beat faster as we crept closer and closer to what proved a much larger settlement than I had expected. I could even feel an odd stirring of nerve-ends as we passed like shadows between the long lines of topicks or lodges or kraals that held so many sleepers. These kraals, as far as I could make out, were built of timber and tanned hides, the wood fantastically carved and stained, and the narrow passageways between them as orderly as the streets of a city. Once my blood ran cold, for behind the rawhide curtain against which I stood rose the midnight crying of a hungry infant, followed by a few words in a crooning voice and certain deglutition sounds that made me suspect a restless baby had been taken to breast. Once, too,

Pareso emitted a short hiss of warning to Knutsson, who was carrying the heavy treasure-bag on his shoulder, as the latter cursed softly in the darkness after stumbling over a pet kid tethered to a kraal-post.

But we managed to reach the empty concourse without interruption and while Knutsson and I stood on guard, Pareso forced an entrance into the temple and finally whispered for us to follow him. I had scant time to study the interior of this grotesquely beamed building, though even in the hurry of our preparations I caught sight of strange effigies cast or carved out of what appeared to be solid gold, and a sort of altar, also of gold, hung with woven cloth fringed with polished points of walrus ivory. For my first duty was to hold an electric flash-light while Pareso completed his transfiguration of the placid-eyed Knutsson. The big Swede's lower limbs, to this end, had already been painted with gold-leaf dissolved in banana-oil, and the upper portions of the huge blond frame Pareso now proceeded to cover with a luminous phosphorus solution. This

made even my own eyes widen a little at the uncanny effect in the darkness, once my lamp was switched off. With what remained of the phosphorus Pareso touched up my own humble apparel, smearing enough of it on my face to make me sneeze and then hurriedly ornamenting his own person until we made an illuminated trio rather resembling something recently escaped from the Lower Regions.

But there was precious little humor in the picture for any of us, since the most difficult part of the performance had yet to be faced. That came after Pareso had carefully explored the platform before the temple and found that high on a dais covered with hammered gold, between two cressets of gold, stood an eagle of the same precious metal, as uncouthly contrived as the carving on a totem-pole head. Under this Pareso placed a charge of explosive connected with a time-fuse, and on either outer corner of the platform, between a second noise-bomb, he planted a quantity of Greek-fire, with whispered instructions that I was to set it off

when he said so, and not before. Then, having disposed four Roman candles about the rear of the platform, he abstracted a box of parlor matches from his treasure-bag, before showing me how the bag itself should be secreted under the altar boards at the inner end of the temple, where a ceaselessly flowing spring provided a sort of drinking-font for the faithful. Then, after whispering a few final instructions to Knutsson and me, our chief stood for a silent minute or two on the outer platform, staring about at the sleeping kraals, at the pallid distant peaks behind which the green and opal waves of the Northern Lights were playing.

"And here's where the show starts!" he said in a voice so offhanded and quiet that at the moment it made me feel a little ashamed of the chills spidering up and down my own backbone.

But I had scant time to think about my own feelings, for I could see him as he stepped forward and struck a match and applied the flame to the fuse-end on the noise-bomb. The silence, a moment later, was torn by a roar of sound that echoed and

reechoed still again between the mountain-slopes behind us. And that deeper sound, as it subsided like a tennis-ball in a series of ever-diminishing rebounds, was taken up by a newer and nearer sound. This was composed of a growing chorus of shrieks and wails from the startled sleepers all about us, calls and shouts of terror rising above cries of wonder. And when the still darkened concourse began to fill with crowding shadows Pareso and I set off the Roman candles. A long moan broke from the assembling tribe at that unearthly exhibition, and before it had quite died away my stage director called to me to light the Greek-fire while he himself touched off the fuse beneath the eagle-god on the dais of hammered gold.

I did as I was ordered. Yet, at the same moment that my fingers set flame to the chemical, something whizzed past my ear so close to my stooping face that I could feel the breath of its movement. As I swung about I saw that a spear, long and heavy-headed and slender of shaft, had imbedded its point in the platform timber beside

me. I could see, in the mounting red glow of the fire, the still poised figure of the thrower, the forward-thrust right arm, the whites of the watching hostile eyes under the frowning brow. I reached for my revolver, under some tugging impulse of protection, and would have shot the half-naked fool where he stood, had not Pareso called out sharply to me. For by this time, high up on the dais from which their ancient idol had been so miraculously blown, Pareso had planted the immense iridescent figure of Karl Knutsson.

The huge blond figure stood there, shrouded in the supernatural glow of his phosphorus-coat, played on by the flames of the Greek-fire. And a silence settled over the crowd confronting us. With a movement oddly concerted that assemblage of half-clad natives fell to their knees and leaned forward until their brows touched the ground. And as I wiped the stinking phosphorus from my face Pareso mounted the platform with his flash-light in his hand and, sweeping that sea of upturned faces, spoke to them in a reassuring voice.

What words he said I have no means of telling, for he spoke in a tongue quite unknown to me. For that matter I suspect that it was largely unknown to his listeners. But they seemed to gather, in the end, the purport of what he was trying to tell them, for, instead of continuing to shrink away, they slowly drew closer. And Knutsson was thereupon told to step down to the edge of the platform, where Pareso started things off by meekly stooping and kissing that big Swede's freshly gilded foot, with a muttered aside for me to be as prompt in doing the same. So I swallowed my gorge and brought my lips as close to the gilded shin-bone as my pride would permit and circled promptly about to the back of the platform in time to see what must have been the chief of the tribe, a sinewy old man with hair as colorless as shredded hemp rope, shuffle muttering up to the great gilded foot and bend low over it. But figure by figure, as the Greek-fire burned low, they came in single file, making obeisance and seeming to like the smell of the banana-oil. And while that prolonging ceremonial

was under way the darkness of midnight slowly merged into the faint gray of promised dawn.

Many of those tribesmen, I noticed, had come with either long-handled spears or short bows at their sides. And although they were neither terrifying in stature nor openly hostile of face, there was no knowing to what ends mob-impulse might at any moment drive them. But Pareso, apparently, was leaving no ragged ends to his entertainment, for he was once more up on the platform haranguing them. He seemed to be telling them, as far as I could judge, that this new god had been sent to them in answer to prophecy, that he was there to counsel and protect them and do away with the witchcraft of the false gods that were gone, the gods who had neither the gifts of speech or movement nor the power to strike death from the fire-stick of the immortals. To bring this still closer home to them, the speaker, noticing an early-stirring ewe-sheep that had wandered into the open square, thrust his revolver into Knutsson's hand and commanded him to kill the animal.

There was not a stir in the crowd as Knutsson, craftily enough, waited a moment or two until the idly straying ewe advanced still closer to the platform, the marksman in question being none too sure of his aim. Then Knutsson pulled the trigger, and, largely through what I accepted as more luck than skill, bowled over the animal.

A gasp went up from the crowd, the more impressionable of the spectators once more prostrating themselves before the big blond on the dais, the more curious examining the dead sheep. It was the old chief who then shuffled forward and by sign and gesture conveyed his wish that the magic be repeated, this time on a comely young woman who stood but a few paces away from him. So Pareso was compelled to point out, as best he could, that the wilful taking of human life was strictly against the new god's law and that an untimely end would overtake the person violating that law. While the old chief was still in the foreground, in fact, Pareso beckoned him up to the edge of the platform, where, taking out his box of safety-matches, he

gravely presented the crafty-eyed old man with a single match and with equal solemnity passed one over to me.

"This," proclaimed Pareso, "is to show who the true worker of big medicine may be." He then pantomimed for the chief to strike his match-end on a small stone. The result, of course, was the mere breaking of the slender match-stalk. But when Pareso took the stone and, holding his match-box close beside it, struck fire apparently out of thin air, murmurs of wonder and admiration went up from the lingering throng. When he passed the stone and match-box to me, and I repeated the operation, the murmurs were neither so long nor so loud. But Pareso seized the occasion to make it as clear as he could that he himself, who should be thereafter known as Thunder-Bird, and I, who would henceforward carry the name of Fire-Stone, were the duly appointed high priests to the new god that had been given to them.

It was then that the old chief, Attapok, called a conference of his under-chiefs.

Much talk and powwowing ensued, accordingly, with much whispering and head-wagging about the small circle squatted at the center of the court, from which the women and stragglers had been sent back to their kraals.

So prolonged was that conference, in fact, that Knutsson grew tired of standing at attention and mutteringly complained to Pareso, who himself became so impatient that he finally reached into his pocket and took out a jealously treasured package of cigarettes, one of which he passed over to both Knutsson and myself.

It was four long months since the taste of tobacco had been on my tongue and I smoked with as much gusto, I think, as either Knutsson or the tired-eyed man now known as Thunder-Bird. But the debating circle, as we blew forth our mellow clouds of smoke in the morning air, suddenly started to their feet, fell back in a slowly receding line, and once more prostrated themselves before the altar-platform.

That last miracle, we saw, had turned the trick.

We who ate fire and belched forth smoke were obviously not of the race of mortals. We were beings born in our own far-distant world of mystery, and tribute would be paid to the great new Fire-God as befitted his station. The tribal temple that stood behind us was ours to occupy and use to our own ends. The great Fire-God would be reverenced and worshiped second only to Sookinook herself, who was eternal and had always been with them. But we had only to express a wish and in so far as it lay in the power of the Children of the Uncrossable Mountains, it would be fulfilled.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MASTER OF MAGIC

A STRANGE life began for us that day. Yet its strangeness, I'm afraid, was not at the time fully apparent to us. For, compared with the tumultuous months that had gone before, our days seemed singularly sedate and ordered.

Knutsson, of course, was confined to the temple, where we did our best to keep him shrouded in as much mystery as his position demanded. But Pareso and I, within certain limits, were able to wander about as we wished. We found, however, that there were certain tribal taboos which we were supposed to respect. The upper mountain-slopes over which we had entered that kingdom, for instance, were known as the Forbidden Hills and ill-luck invariably befell those who mounted too

high along their crests. On the opposing side of the wide valley was a plateau territory known as the Bad Lands, where black oil oozed out of the soil and evil spirits put a curse on all who traversed its polluted rocks. For, rich as that territory was in oil, there was a rigid tribal taboo on this stinking fluid of the Infernal One, tradition relating that untold years before a tidal wave of this burning blackness had once descended upon the tribe and all but wiped it out. Higher up in the hills, in fact, a huge dike had been built to wall back a natural and never-ending seepage of petroleum which now found its escape in some other quarter as it ceaselessly overflowed the malignant black lake. This we were duly warned to shun as we would shun the boiling crater of Kiooka, the dormant volcano beyond it. But I noticed an odd light in Pareso's deep-set eyes when he was first told of that disdained reservoir of energy. A brooding look came into his face, too, when he visited the gold-diggings where the younger men of the tribe worked in languid-moving shifts, uncovering wind-

ing seams of the yellow metal as it was needed for their casual community needs.

Yet even more interesting was the duly acquired information as to the Temple of Sookinook, high above the snow-line on one of the northwestern mountain-slopes. Pareso encountered a fixed reluctance to discuss this mountain temple and was given to understand it was a sanctuary the violation of which was promptly punishable by death. But as he applied himself to mastering certain simpler forms and words of the language—in which, by the way, he unearthed a root or two which he suspected of being of Scandinavian origin, just as he was equally bewildered to find a few French nouns incorporated in that pagan vocabulary—and as he slowly bribed his way into the good graces of the wily old Attapok, he was prompted to conclude that the word "Sookinook" was a corruption of "Sukh-eh-nukh," which in earlier Eskimo mythology was the Golden Woman Who Never Died, and seemed originally to have been a personification of the sun itself, spoken of as the Eternal Maiden of Gold, just as the Greeks once spoke of Phœbus Apollo.

"And what is in this temple high in the hills?" Pareso casually inquired of the aged Attapok, whose heart he had just softened with a cupful of Oolong tea, well-boiled to bring out the flavor, as our supply of the same was strictly limited.

"The goddess herself reposes there," acknowledged the old chief, after a moment of hesitation.

"And who is she?" inquired the high priest so miraculously exhaling cigarette smoke from his nostrils.

Attapok pointed to the golden globe high in the northern heavens.

"The Daughter of the Sun," he said, lowering his head twice toward the ground as he spoke.

"And whence came she?" asked Pareso as he refilled the old chief's cup.

"That no man knoweth," was the answer. "But it was claimed by my father's father that she existed always, that she shall never know death just as she has never known birth."

"Then she is a woman?" pursued the thoughtful-eyed Pareso.

"Yea, she is a woman," answered Attapok, "yet

not a woman, for she is godlike in her bigness as only the true gods are big."

"And what is she like?"

"We are forbidden to speak of her except in words of worship," the high priest of the newer god was solemnly warned. "And it is only after many rites and the attainment of manhood that the chosen ones of our tribe are permitted to look upon her. And that only at each change of the moon."

"Then she is fair?" prompted Pareso.

"So fair," responded Attapok, "that her beauty is as blinding as the beauty of the summer sun when it is first risen above the mountaintops."

Pareso, I noticed, gave much thought to that reply. There was a harder light in his eyes when he finally spoke again.

"But is this goddess, who lives not and dies not, able to work big medicine?" he asked. "Can she arise from her throne and face her people and perform wonders before their eyes?"

"She sleeps on a throne," was the slightly retarded reply, "from which she can never arise."

"Ah, then she is not a living goddess, but a goddess of this yellow metal of which you have so much!"

"Nay," cried old Attapok, "she is of flesh and blood, just as this new god you have brought us is of flesh and blood. Yet she is of gold, too, of gold as bright as any we mold in our kiln-fires."

"But if she has not the gift of speech," persisted Pareso, "how can she comfort and guide you in your moments of doubt?"

"There is a saying almost as old as these hills that surround us," was Attapok's reply, "that on the day our Sookinook is removed from her throne this tribe will perish in a wall of fire from above."

The purport of all this I learned, of course, many weeks later. But the effect of it on Pareso's plans I was to learn before the lapse of many days.

In the meantime, however, we had problems much closer to hand. For our first disturbing discovery was that Knutsson, being of the higher spirits of the air, was regarded by his worshipers as far above the trivial hungers of the flesh. Food

was duly brought to the temple door for his two high priests, but none was brought for the god himself. And the giant-like Knutsson, being always a man of large and active appetite, was not slow to register his disappointment at any such arrangement. So Pareso was driven to solving that problem by having the two of us dine thereafter in private and demanding a considerably heavier ration, which, after exercising the self-denial of the true acolyte, we secretly shared with the anxious-eyed Swede in his sanctuary, now made comfortable with kid-pillows stuffed with swan-feathers. Also, when Pareso was once assured of his authority, he caused the new god to make it known that the yellow maidens had performed their solemn dance in the concourse, to the sound of drums of different metal so easily removed from the gold-diggings was not abhorrent to him and that on certain days of the week the faithful should bring tribute of the same and place it on the platform before him.

So on stated days, after the tribal rites had been gone through with, after the duly selected

tones, some mellow and muffled and some sharper and stirring, and to the strains of pipes made apparently from some animal's shin-bone pierced with stops, the older men would troop dutifully up to the dais and place at Knutsson's feet nodules and nuggets of raw gold from the hillside mines. Other gifts were brought, such as folds of soft wool, for the women of the tribe were skilled spinners and weavers of the hair from their tamed mountain-sheep, and such as carved ivory, since certain of the men were very adroit and artful engravers of bone, producing small and strange-looking images not unlike those of the Far East. A certain portion of this ivory, we were even informed, had been obtained from the tusks of three mammoths which had been exposed to the wandering tribe after an earthquake shock had shaken the great haired bodies free from the glacial ice in which they had been entombed for countless years. Yet the flesh of these creatures remained still firm and sweet, and only after the meat had lain in the open sunlight for a week or two did corruption set in.

That story I was at the time inclined to doubt, until Pareso reminded me that on more than one occasion in northern Siberia these great Pleistocene creatures had been so found, embedded in ice which had preserved intact both flesh, skin and hair. He confided to me, too, his final belief that our tribe was not of remote Asiatic origin, as were the Eskimos of the littoral settlements, but were probably descended from hardy Norse explorers who had perhaps taken native wives and drifted inland in search of a more salubrious climate. Some seismic upheaval, he contended, might even have shut them in that secluded country now so completely surrounded by its ramparting cordilleras. This was supported, in a way, by the tradition that there were once wolves in the territory, but they had been unknown for many generations. And it was further borne out by the presence there of a deteriorated type of the Rocky Mountain sheep and a small and half-domesticated wapiti from which the women obtained their hides for tanning.

These women themselves, however, were of

much more interest to me than were either their animals or their origin. The singularly smooth texture of their skin may have been due to the community bathing which they practised without shame or sex-consciousness in several of the larger of the warm pools dedicated to that service, just as the calisthenic beauty of their small but compact figures must have been due largely to the open-air life they led. But the unexpected blueness of their eyes and the fairness of their bodies and the ever-arresting tones of polished copper and yellow in their plaited head-dress gave them a deluding air of delicacy, a sense of the doll-like, even an impression of diminished vitality, which was not in accord with either their manual efficiency or their actual physical strength. And the most attractive of them all to me, perhaps for purely subjective reasons, was the slender-bodied sheep-girl whom I had first met up in the Forbidden Hills. Her name, I found, was Ota, and it was her brother Pennekuk who had done his best to put a spear through my ribs on the night we first invaded the Temple of the Golden Eagle.

Ota, I had reason to believe, was not altogether unconscious of my existence or altogether ungrateful for the service I had once rendered her. But our chances of being together were limited both by her native shyness and by my official position as a temple attendant, though more than once our eyes had met in prolonging glances of curiosity and more than once I contrived that my movements should take me as close to Ota's side as the occasion would permit.

This must have come to the attention of the wily old Attapok, since he finally suggested that it might be expedient for me to choose from the women of the tribe a companion with whom to study the language of his people. It could be arranged, Attapok gave me to understand, for the trivial matter of an ounce or two of the Thunder-Bird's tea-leaves, and if the maid Ota, for instance, met with my approval she would be found soft-voiced and sufficiently pleasant to listen to.

There was small doubt about my actual feelings in the matter, but I was prompted to act with the

utmost caution, for with all that show of friendliness from the simple people we had imposed ourselves upon I could not rid myself of the impression that we were being always watched, watched both stealthily and steadily. I even found the courage to mention the matter to Pareso, who regarded me for a moment or two with a slightly sardonic eye and explained that his precious tea could not be spared for ends so trivial, but that I might reward the old chief with one of our "trade" mouth-organs and placate the lady herself with a pink silk handkerchief and a string of blue beads.

Ota, in fact, trembled openly and violently when these were presented to her, being under the impression that she had been duly bought into slavery, as it were. But I had, of course, no such intention. Ota, when this was explained to her, colored perceptibly along her swarthily pale skin and rewarded me with what I was foolish enough to accept as a look of gratitude. And when we decorously enough began our study of words together she wore the blue beads about her smooth young

throat, while the handkerchief, I later discovered, had been quietly appropriated by Attapok, for the secret ornamentation of his own leathery old neck.

Trouble, however, was brewing much closer than we imagined. And it arose in a quarter where we should have expected concord. For Knutsson, living as he was in regal indolence, besides growing full-blooded and ampler of girth, became oddly restive and insurrectionary in mood. He even began to nurse certain delusions of grandeur which made him unexpectedly hard to manage. If he was to keep up this play-acting business, he gruffly protested, it was time that a few of his wishes were respected. And when inquiries were made as to the source of his unhappiness it was discovered that the call of the blood was triumphing over the dignity of office. He stubbornly insisted, in fact, on a lady companion for his solitude.

Both Pareso and I tried to reason with him. But it was of no avail. He was tired of living like a pig in a pen. He'd had about enough of the whole never-ending flubdubbery and unless he could get a

little satisfaction out of life he was through with being a two-legged imitation of the rising sun.

So the harried Pareso was compelled to hold another of his tribal cancans, where it was announced that the higher gods were not altogether pleased with our conduct, since we had overlooked maintaining a ceaseless altar-fire in the temple and had neglected consecrating a vestal maiden to attend the same. So after the distribution of the usual placatory gifts from the treasure-bag and after much talk between the under-chiefs, it was agreed that a woman, both young and fair, should be selected for the purpose. My heart went down like a plummet, however, when I saw that the person duly selected for immuring herself in the temple with Knutsson was Ota,—Ota with her smooth skin dusted with powdered pipestone and her shoulders fantastically colored with ocher-paints and her slender body weighed down by a barbaric weight of extra gold amulets and rings and charms, and deep in her eyes a look of immolation which left her impervious to my sudden cry and protest.

Pareso himself must have detected some sinister undercurrent in this strange ceremony, for that night, after Ota had been surrendered for her sacred duties and the concourse was once more empty of people, he went to Knutsson and had a long and none too satisfactory talk with him. And while they talked Ota herself, looking incredibly childlike in her bright metal rings and bosom-frescoes of paganly daubed pigments, crept to my side and studied me with quietly luminous eyes.

"Is he truly a god?" she asked me in a voice as soft as a wood-dove's coo.

It was not an easy question for me to answer. I owed a certain loyalty, I knew, to my own people, and my life probably depended on my allegiance to them and their plans. Yet the thought of sacrificing this girl to the end that awaited her was abhorrent to me. It sickened my very soul. But it was a situation in which I was helpless, in which I was worse than helpless.

"He is a god," I equivocated, "even as your Sookinook is truly one of the gods!"

She stood studying my face.

"Then I will be safe in his hands," she finally asserted.

"You will be safe in his hands," I echoed, sick at heart. And before I quite knew what I was doing, I placed my arms about her and drew her close to my side. She did not seem to understand the meaning of my kisses, since they were something unknown to her tribal ways, but I could feel her arms straining about me and I could see the sorrow in her eyes as she drew my face slowly down and held it for a silent moment against her forehead.

"Good-by!" she said in a choked voice as she turned away.

"Good-by!" I repeated as I stood with my hands clenched tight, watching her as she stepped slowly into the temple where I knew Knutsson to be awaiting her. . . .

She came out of that Temple, an hour later, with blood on her mouth. I thought, at first, that Knutsson had struck her. But that was not the case,

as both Pareso and I were soon to learn. Instead of striking her, in fact, he had accosted her so endearingly as she stooped over her fresh-made altar-fire that she had shrunk away from him. And when he had seized her she had sunk her white carnivorous teeth deep into the flesh of his huge forearm.

It was as I heard her small scream of protest and terror and as she ran white-faced through the temple door that I suddenly lost my head and went Berserk. Without being fully conscious of my movements I seized one of the long-headed spears of gold which Pareso had been so sagaciously accumulating from his tribal warriors, and with this I charged straight at the bleeding blond giant, who at the moment stood the embodiment of all evil to me.

Now, Knutsson was no coward, and his strength was plainly twice that of mine, but he obviously had no wish to argue with a crazy man and perhaps find twelve inches of pointed gold thrust through his gizzard. So he made flight the better part of

valor and with guttural grunts of protest took to his heels. While Pareso was busy in holding back the terror-stricken Ota, Knutsson escaped through the temple door and disappeared in the darkness.

All this, not unnaturally, left Pareso in no comfortable frame of mind. He cursed us both for blundering fools and averred we would all get even worse than they had given poor Valiquette. But he left the shaking Ota in my care while he stole forth with a flash-light to search for his runaway god. He came back, a little before dawn, with no news or trace of the truant; and I could see by his face that the situation was not at all to his liking. He was, however, resourceful enough to call a tribal meeting that morning and proclaim that the Spirit of Fire was so pleased with the appointment of the new priestess that no devotional exercises would be demanded of the people for a few days.

This went off well enough until an interruption came about in the form of a harangue from the hot-eyed young Pennekuk, who seemed to nurse a suspicion that his young sister had been bodily

consumed and found the courage to demand a glimpse of her still in the flesh.

This, he was solemnly informed, would be duly granted him with the coming of nightfall; and the crowd disappeared, feeling none too kindly toward the recalcitrant Pennekuk. Then I was sent forth to make a quiet search for Knutsson.

I had, of course, to be guarded in my movements and there was a natural limit to the extent of my wandering. They resulted, however, in nothing but failure. And when I returned to the temple that evening, tired and discouraged, I found Pareso decorating Ota with what remained of his phosphorus and preparing her for exhibition on the sacred dais. To this end he had her hold out before her a small vessel filled with what remained of the Greek-fire, to which at the right moment she touched a lighted match. The familiar vocal wave of wonder swept over the assembled crowd, and Pareso, to make sure of his triumph, passed out three small bars of sweetened chocolate among the chiefs most worthy of such a favor.

But for us inside the temple it was not a happy night. Nor did we breathe much easier until the passing of the third day, when, under cover of darkness, Knutsson quietly returned to the temple.

He came back to us an oddly changed man. He seemed, for the first time in his life, humble and meditative and given over to some strange perplexity of the spirit. He paid no attention whatever to the shrinking and watchful-eyed Ota and gave equally little thought to his accumulated food. Pareso did not question him, however, until Ota had retired to her quarters.

"I suppose you know what this will probably cost us?" contended Pareso, fixing him with an accusatory eye.

"I can't see that it counts much, now," was the none too satisfactory answer.

"What has happened to change things?" demanded Pareso.

"I have been to the other temple," Knutsson answered in little more than a whisper, "to the temple of the Sun Woman."

I could see Pareso's color change.

"But that is death——" he began.

Knutsson laughed quietly.

"It was," he rumbled in his huge throat. "It was death to the guard who watches by night and the second guard who watches by day. I choked 'em both with my naked hands. I killed them and tossed them into the crevasse beyond the second ice-field. And then I went into the temple."

"And the woman?" asked Pareso, breathing deeper.

For a full minute Knutsson sat silent. I could see the light that came into the eyes of brooding blue, the unwilled working of the big blond face where Ota's scratches still showed across the bronze cheek.

"*She is there, waiting for us,*" he said in a whisper that held a touch of awe.

Pareso moved uneasily.

"Were you seen?" he quickly inquired.

"By nobody who remained alive," was his curt response.

Pareso surprised me by getting to his feet, crossing to the temple door, and looking carefully about through the darkness. Having done that, he returned to our side.

"Now tell me about it," he commanded.

"It is not a matter to be talked about," answered the voice of Knutsson, as abstracted as a sleep-walker's.

"But it must be talked about," persisted Pareso.

"It can't be talked about," was Knutsson's determinedly quiet reply. "But we must go to her while we still live to look upon her beauty!"

"Her beauty?" echoed the other. "What's that to us?"

"When you have seen her, as I have seen her, you will understand."

"And when do you propose that we see her?" was Pareso's almost mocking inquiry. But the touch of scorn in the question, I noticed, drove none of the exaltation out of the meditative blue eyes.

"To-night," was the quietly enunciated answer. "We must go to-night. *Then you'll understand!*"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SLEEPING WOMAN

My most persistent feeling, as we set out that night on our strange journey to the Temple of the Sun's Daughter, was a sullen resentment of Knutsson's leadership. I was, I think, vaguely jealous of his importance. But as we fought our way outward and upward, after groping so stealthily through the sleeping settlement without once daring to use our flash-light, I was compelled to admire the sheer animal strength of that big blond Swede who was leading the way. His feet seemed winged with an impatience that made it hard for Pareso and me to keep up with him, and time and time again he was compelled to stop in the darkness and wait for us. The farther we went, in fact, the harder the going became. I could tell easily enough that

we were climbing, that we were steadily mounting into higher and colder air. A couple of times, indeed, we got completely off the trail, but Knutsson, weaving back and forth like a setter nosing out a lost quarry-scent, soon led us back to the path and kept us hurrying along at his heels.

"How much farther?" asked Pareso, stopping.

"Another half-mile," answered Knutsson, pointing upward through the northern darkness that is never altogether darkness. And he was off again, doggedly and determinedly.

Our climb, after that, was steeper, a part of it being over steps cut in the rock-face and along a slope of solid ice that ended in a small upland plateau overshadowed by a still higher rampart of snow-capped trappean formation. In the center of this plateau I could dimly make out an oblong lodge of squared timbers, and those timbers, I could see when Pareso played his flash-light along them, were bleached as white as bone and were ornamented at the corners with carvings of gold and ivory. But I had small time to give attention

to such details, for Knutsson, with the flash-light in his slightly tremulous hand, was already swinging back the heavy wooden door studded with pins of gold. I could see the intermittent mist of his breath in the cold air, and in the sepulchral gloom in which I found myself as I crowded in after Pareso's body I noticed a faint shiver of chilliness creep through my blood.

"She's there," whispered Knutsson.

And as Pareso swung his light across the narrow chamber I saw a roughly-welded railing of gold that surrounded an oblong of crystal-clear ice, at least nine feet in length and five feet in height. The arresting thing about this dolmen of ice, however, was not its clarity, or the glass-like smoothness of its rounded surface, but the fact that it held at its core the half-recumbent figure of a blond woman.

I was, in a way, not altogether unprepared for some such discovery. But the thing that startled me, that took my breath away and held me spellbound, was the incredibly vivid and lifelike

appearance of that half-reclining figure. My next conscious thought was of the marmoreal smoothness and pallor of the skin, for the figure was quite nude, except for the shrouding tangle of tawny hair that cascaded in wavering gold down one side of the body. This hair was in no way filleted or bound, yet in the medium through which I studied it, it seemed compressed into a sculpturesque sort of compactness that might have deceived one as to its volume but could take away no part of its coloring. And its coloring was the remarkable, the miraculous thing about it. Once freed, I felt, it would easily have reached to the slightly bent knees in a shower of luminous gold. For it was the most golden gold I had ever looked upon, the sort of gold that, in catching outside light, seems to hold a light of its own. And that strange sarcophagus of flawless ice, seeming to bring it closer to me even while it walled the wavering radiance away from me, in no way dulled the coiled mass of tawny glory that appeared to lend a warmer afterglow to the very body beside it. For I could even discern the

axillary gold threads where one rounded arm was thrown above the head and the darker fringe of lashes about the languidly closed eyes

It wasn't until I looked closer at those duskier-shadowed eyes that I awakened to the calm and regal beauty of the face itself, the smoothness of the untroubled low brow, the perfect contour of the austere oval cheek, the soft womanliness of the rounded chin, and the wistful play of line about the humanizing rich lips.

She was indeed beautiful. She was so mistily beautiful that she made the breath halt and caused the heart to ache. For with all her sense of tranquillity, of timelessness, of majestic calm, she still carried an air of pathos which I found it hard to decipher. She lay before me as benignant and impersonal as the carved Aphrodite that was found in the sands of Milos, but as I stared at the tenderly rounded breast so visibly and yet so hopelessly committed to its engulfing cold I found some phantasmal sense of deprivation, some ghostly sense of loss, tugging forlornly at my heart. It may have

been the heroic size of the figure, or it may have been the depersonalizing smoothness of the marble-like skin, or it may have been the foreigneering effect of the pose, as passive as that of a swimmer in ever-motionless water, but the fact remained that this sleeping blond woman impressed me more as a Norse myth descended to earth again, as a pagan and legendary figure emerging out of the earliest mists of time, as something incredibly strayed out of Valhalla itself.

So absorbed had been my study of her, indeed, that I did not at first notice the human hand enclosed in a smaller block of ice, placed triumphantly on top of the larger crystal oblong. In that hand, which had been severed at the wrist, was clutched a heavy cross of silver.

On Knutsson's face, I saw as I swung about, was something between rapture and devotion. I could see the familiar animal-like glow of his eyes, though it was far from an animal passion that burned within them. On that massive blond face, in fact, I detected a look of reverence which I had

never before seen there. And an uneasy stirring of the nerves went through my body, the next moment, when, glancing from the one blond figure to the other, I seemed to catch some mysterious kinship between the two, some confraternity of coloring and build and Viking tawniness of skin and hair. One was full-blooded and earthy; one was etherealized and tranquil, infinitely remote and impersonal in a chill and immuring chastity of light.

It was the sound of Pareso's voice, speaking out of the long unbroken stillness, that brought me turning sharply about to my other companion. What he said I do not remember. But I still remember the narrow-eyed intentness of his stare as he leaned close in against that polished ice-slab. His look was not the look of the worshiper. In it was none of the inarticulate adoration, the mute yearning, of the brawny Swede beside him. About the older man was little of that blind and groping sex-impulse which often enough leaves reason itself tottering on its throne. I doubt, in fact, if Pareso stood much impressed by the weird and regal

beauty of the figure confronting him. That mysterious blond woman, to him, was merely a magnified specimen *in vitro,* a patient enduring a catalepsy sufficiently prolonged to be perplexing. He even circled about the crystal catafalque and stooped low, grunting with satisfaction.

"It's there, all right," he quietly proclaimed. "And considerably smaller than I could have expected."

"What's there?" I asked, my voice tremulous with more than the cold.

"The wound," he explained, brushing the silent Knutsson aside as he continued his inspection. "The wound she made when she opened that vein with Blödoxe's little bone knife."

Those words, once their meaning had filtered through to my brain, caused me to stare incredulously at the recumbent blond figure. It may have been an accident of light, or it may have been something in my own mind, but that large and flowing body seemed less godlike, less marmoreal and impersonal, as I once more turned and studied it.

There seemed a faint tinge of vitality in the softly rounded flesh; and if the broad bosom had heaved and subsided in a quiet sigh of life, it might not have greatly surprised me.

It was Pareso's voice that brought me out of my trance.

"But be pleased to notice where they have put the old boy's hand," he said with a not altogether pleasant laugh as he glanced toward the smaller block of ice crowning the larger.

"Whose hand?" I asked as the rapt Knutsson once more crowded in close to the rough gold balustrade.

"Old Valiquette's, of course," was Pareso's answer. "And it's there as a gentle reminder of what will happen to strangers who get too inquisitive."

It was slightly less clear, that smaller block of ice, than the larger pellucid reliquary that held the warmer-toned figure as suggestive of life as the mutilated member above it was suggestive of violence and death. But I could see the light strike

through to the silver crucifix between the ironically prehensile fingers. And it touched me with a sense of tragedies, old and forgotten, an unhappy echo out of times far back along the shadowy corridors of life. I even shivered, in spite of myself, as I speculated on why that crucifix was still held between the fingers where it had no right to hang.

"Shouldn't we be getting back?" I suggested, wondering why life, of a sudden, should seem a frail and tenuous thing.

Pareso went to the portico and peered out.

"Yes, we must go," he agreed. Then he stopped to smile a little as he studied the still rapt Swede beside the railing of gold. "You like her, Karl?" he asked with a levity that seemed out of place in such surroundings.

Knutsson's answer, apparently in his native tongue, was unintelligible to me. But I noticed that his eyes remained on the blond woman as he spoke.

"Ah, then you would prefer this temple?" said Pareso, still with a touch of mockery.

"Yes," acknowledged Knutsson. And there seemed something almost childlike in his simplicity of note.

"You prefer being with her?"

"Yes," was the low-toned reply.

"But wouldn't you prefer her alive?" pursued the ruminative and narrow-eyed Pareso. "Living and breathing and warm?"

"Yes," answered Knutsson, moving his lips with an effort.

"And what would you do to bring that about?"

Still again the answer was in a tongue unknown to me. But I could see a renewed animal-like glow at the center of Knutsson's widened blue eyes.

"And would you feel that way, to the end?" asked Pareso.

"Yes," answered Knutsson.

"Then I imagine you'll get what you want," said Pareso, more to himself than to his companion, apparently, as he snapped shut his pocket-flash and ushered us out through the doorway.

He stood for a moment, looking down over the

sleeping valley. I didn't speak for several minutes, as we groped our way down again, for it was no easy matter to find the path in that uncertain light. And there were times when a false step would have meant swift and certain death.

"What are you going to do about it?" I finally asked, my mind still full of the strange figure we had left behind us.

Instead of answering that question, Pareso asked me another.

"Have you ever read Herodotus?" he inquired.

I hadn't, of course, and I admitted it.

"In that case," he resumed, "you wouldn't know about Pisistratus, who was once Tyrant of Athens and wanted to return to power, to reinstate himself with the public. He was sagacious enough, in doing this, to unearth in one of the Attic villages an exceptionally tall and handsome woman by the name of Phya. He took his woman and dressed her in shining armor and put her on a fine chariot and drove into Athens, proclaiming that the goddess Minerva was bringing him back to her own citadel.

And if you know your history you'll recall that the artifice was an entire success and Pisistratus was accepted as coming home with the special favor of heaven."

"And what's that to do with us?" I asked as I followed beside him in the darkness.

"We have a goddess of our own," was his curt reply. "We've got a Phya, and I intend to make use of her."

"To what end?" I asked.

"Good God, man," he said, stopping short, "you don't suppose we're going to stay in this benighted wilderness for all the rest of our life, do you? You don't suppose we've faced all this hardship and peril just for the fun of the thing, do you? There's gold and oil here, gold and oil enough to buy a kingdom. But what good is it all when we're still locked in here with these half-civilized morons who don't know the difference between a parlor-match and the fire of Prometheus? There's some way that gold can be packed over the mountains and there's some way that oil can be piped down to the

Mackenzie Basin. There must be! But before that's done we've got to show this bunch of pig-headed albino Indians that we're their masters and that we've a right to take over the things they can't appreciate."

Still again I caught an inkling of the man's Machiavellian audacity, his casual and crafty self-seeking. But plans such as his, I remembered, had a way of going wrong, of defeating themselves through their own sheer pretentiousness. And when they went wrong they had the habit of dragging down both their mighty Napoleon and his small-potato marshals.

"That may not be so easy as it sounds," I demurred, feeling, for the first time since I had ventured into those northern regions, a sharp ache of homesickness for the life I had left so far behind me, for the quiet and security of the white man's city, for the knowledge that I could sleep in peace and awake without peril at my elbow.

"Well, it's too late to draw back, even if we wanted to," my companion pointed out to me as we

trudged on, now along a less precipitous trail. "*Jamais arrière!* And I've pretty well worked out my line of action."

"Then just what," I demanded, "do you propose doing?"

He didn't answer for a minute or two, waiting for the lagging Knutsson to catch up with us.

"Among other things," Pareso said with a quietness that tended to take the strangeness out of the assertion, "*I'm going to bring that woman back to life!*"

He said it casually enough. But I could feel a tingle of nerves go through my body at the uncanniness, the sheer preposterousness, of such a statement. And I began to feel that running through this man, for all his haphazard skill and happy-go-lucky courage, was a streak of madness.

"And if it can't be done?" I suggested, trying to match his quietness of tone with my own.

"I've traveled far enough to make the try," he reminded me, with the ghost of a laugh that fell none too pleasantly on my ear.

"But supposing you fail?" I persisted, feeling very much alone in that ghostly northern twilight where the faintly brightening gray prompted us to hurry our steps.

"What's the good of crossing those bridges until we come to them?" was Pareso's retort. "And no matter how it turns out, it needn't be *your* funeral. It's a battle that belongs to Knutsson and me."

"Why Knutsson?" I interrogated as we came to the outer fringe of the kraal settlement.

"You'll understand that when the time arrives," was all that Pareso would say to me.

"But there's one thing I understand right now," I contended.

"What's that?" demanded Pareso.

"That the dead are dead," I retorted, "and that when they've been that way for a few centuries they're not brought back by a turn of the hand."

Pareso did not answer me until we were back in the temple.

"How do you know that the dead are dead?" he finally challenged.

"In the same way," I answered him, "that I know the other basic facts of life."

Pareso's smile was a forbearing one.

"Facts, my boy, can be less basic than they seem. I'm dead, according to your basic facts, when my heart stops beating. I've gone to another world when the blood stops coursing through my veins, and once I've ceased to breathe, I'm no longer alive. That's your claim. Perhaps! And only perhaps. But I and other men of science have seen a heart stop beating, stop dead, and yet be started again, by outside hands, and the machinery of life go on as before. Respiration can stop, as it must stop when a swimmer goes down and for a quarter of an hour his body lies under water. Yet under right conditions that respiration can be started again and the unconscious patient is brought back to life and the man once more goes about his business in the world."

"Then what *is* life?" I asked.

"That," retorted Pareso, "isn't an easy question to answer. I'd much rather you told *me*."

"Life is consciousness," I cried, resenting my companion's cool-noted condescension.

"By no means," corrected the other; "many of us have been unconscious and remain alive. We do not die when we fall asleep. The hibernating bear is alive. The frozen fish remains a living animal. The sleeping toad immured its unnumbered years in hardening slate, the toad we see unearthed from a mine-drift now and then, comes back to life when he gets a fresh whiff of the essential oxygen."

"I never had the pleasure of seeing one of those extraordinary animals," I said with a shrug.

"No," cried Pareso, "and you never saw a Viking woman who had slept for ten centuries in a Mason jar of glacial-ice, until you saw this woman I'm going to awaken. Yes, it's easy enough to talk about life and death, but it's not so easy to say where the one begins and the other happens to end. It's easy to——"

"But there must be a time," I interrupted, "when a human body is definitely and indisputably dead."

"There is, naturally. But we are not speaking about those who are indisputably dead."

"But there's a something," I persisted, "that marks the truly dead from the merely comatose. There's a time, for instance, when a transplanted tree is gone, when no amount of tending and watering will bring any sign of life back into it. And with the human body, at the end, there's a cessation of something; there's a change—and you know it."

"There is, of course, a protoplasmic change in the brain-cells; and that change, I suppose, must in some way mark the ghostly dividing line. But it's never a fixed line, remember. And man is still too much in the dark about such things to chart its curves, to know its nature. It's simply that *nobody knows.* Nobody on this great green earth of ours can finally and definitely say that this mysterious vital spark, this infinitely slender and fragile potentiality of revival, may not slumber dormant at the core of a brain carefully enough removed from all deteriorative influences. *And I intend to find out.*"

CHAPTER EIGHT

A DEATH FOR A DEATH

FROM that night forward, I discovered, neither Knutsson nor Pareso remained overly interested in the girl, Ota. Knutsson, in fact, went about like a man in a dream. He seemed to be waiting, always waiting, for some event of great moment. Into the brooding blue eyes even came a look of questioning, of hound-like pathos, which I had never before seen there.

With Pareso it was different. That man of action, I soon saw, had no intention of letting the grass grow under his feet. He disappeared for half a day, sat for another half-day deep in thought, and made a preoccupied appraisal of his treasure-bag.

His next move was to call a meeting of old Attapok and the tribal under-chiefs, to whom, be-

fore his harangue, he handed out a few pieces of trade-candy.

"The Spirits of the Air are not pleased," he solemnly averred, "with the manner of worship taking place in the Temple of the Eternal Maiden, or with the continued neglect meted out to Sookinook herself. I know nothing of that temple, and I know even less of her who is called the Golden Daughter of the Sun. But it is said that her spirit complains of the cold, and that her sleep has been so long that she has wearied of it."

This proclamation resulted in a closed conference between Attapok and his under-chiefs, who sat in a constricted circle at the center of the concourse and talked long and earnestly together.

"The words of the Thunder-Bird are always words of wisdom," the old chief finally proclaimed. "But moon by moon and generation after generation Sookinook has been worshiped in the form in which she was sent to us."

Pareso's smile was a patient one. Yet under his breath I could hear him mutter: "An ounce of

lead is the medicine you're waiting for, Old Boy!" His voice was suave, however, and his face was tranquil as he continued his harangue.

"But who, O Attapok, is satisfied with a goddess that merely sleeps? And would it not be better to bring this sleeping woman to life, to awaken her from her long slumber and let her stand before you, a living and breathing woman."

A murmur of dissent ran through the startled circle.

"That, O priest who has come a stranger among us," asserted the old chief, "is neither possible nor desirable. For it is the faith of this tribe that when Sookinook is removed from her throne our people shall perish like grass in the fire. And it is also forbidden that strangers should enter her temple, the penalty for so doing being death."

Pareso gave up, for the time being, but I have every reason to believe he had a later and secret conference with the venal old Attapok, a conference sweetened with trade-candy and ending with a transfer of a few gimcracks from the duffel-bag.

For our leader, returning in high spirits, even tossed me over one of his tin mouth-organs and suggested I teach Ota to play it.

This I willingly enough did. And those hours with Ota, in a sunny niche behind the temple transept, were the happiest I'd known since I entered that country of uncertainties. The girl loved the sounds that came from what she called the Singing Bird Without Wings, and I was not unhappy in watching the softly curved lips blow into the little instrument and the naive smiles of satisfaction as her pouting mouth traversed the serried vents while she ran up the scale and down again. I even tried to teach her a tune or two, though she seemed to find no added delight in what we moderns would call melody. And when her rosy lips were tender from rubbing along the roughly fashioned metal, I consoled them with equally modern kisses, which she liked as much as the music.

But I soon had sterner duties to face. Pennekuk, in fact, appeared before our temple and none too humbly demanded sight of Ota, apparently to

reassure himself as to her safety. And when she appeared before him, betraying no evidence of unhappiness, he drew closer and began pouring whispered messages into her ear.

"I don't altogether like the looks of that sour-faced young buck," asserted Pareso as Ota's brother retreated from the concourse, the sunlight glinting on his long spear-head and the bow strapped close to his side. "Something tells me he may possibly meet with an untimely end."

Yet Pennekuk had his power in the tribe, apparently, for, on the same day that Pareso proudly proclaimed old Attapok to be with us, a group of spearmen appeared before the temple with the demand that the young fire-priestess known as Ota should be restored to her people, since the Thunder-Bird was intent on putting an end to the old order of worship under which she had been yielded to his service.

And seeing we had no further use for the girl, Pareso promptly and graciously surrendered her back to her people, though the ceremony became an

unexpectedly embarrassing one for me when the weeping Ota suddenly turned and threw her arms about my neck, sobbing out, as she pressed on my lips the kisses of the outlander which I had so painstakingly taught her, that she would never be happy away from the side of her Fire-Stone.

"Ah, a softer note in the drama!" said Pareso as his half-scornful eye watched me while I resolutely enough kissed the girl good-by.

But sterner issues were soon confronting us. Even old Attapok, it seemed, had succumbed to a second wind of suspicion. It was clear, he glibly admitted, that the Woman Who Couldn't Die fretted to be free of her icy tomb, even as the fish frozen in the mountain-stream would be free with the return of the sun. But once freed, she might pass into nothingness, and he and his people would then be without a tribal goddess to stand between them and the enmity of the air-spirits.

"Nay," was Pareso's prompt reply, "I will bring Sookinook among you and your people, warm and living as one of your own women, and able to work big medicine on your behalf."

"But what proof have we," contended the old chief, "that you have the power to do this thing?"

"Have I not already worked magic in your midst?" demanded our still patient leader.

"You have worked big medicine, O Thunder-Bird," admitted Attapok, "and have brought thunder to our lodge-doors and strange lights into the sky and have even killed by magic before our eyes. But we have not yet seen you bring life out of death."

"Then what pledge do you and your people ask?" was Pareso's somewhat impatient inquiry.

"We demand," retorted Attapok, after a brief consultation with his associates, "that a death shall pay for a death, so that if Sookinook is not made to live and breathe before our eyes, this new Fire-God and his two high priests, being duly proved without the power of life, shall themselves be put to death to appease the air-spirits they have offended."

Pareso was able to laugh at that, though the shiver that sped through my body was far from a pleasant one.

"And what else is demanded of us?" asked our leader, not without a note of irony.

"It is further demanded," pursued the wary-eyed old chief, "that the two fire-sticks now carried by the strangers-from-over-the-hills shall be given into our keeping until such time as our Sookinook shall show herself warm and breathing before us."

"But if we give up our guns——" I whisperingly began.

"Let 'em have the guns, if they want 'em," averred Pareso. "They'll get them without a shell, you may be sure, so there's nothing to worry about. And as for the other matter, I'm willing to take my chance. So it is agreed then, O Chief," resumed Pareso as he turned back to the waiting elders, "for we know whereof we speak and no fear of the outcome dwells in our bodies. Our fire-sticks shall be committed to your care just as our lives shall be placed in your keeping. And in return for that we demand the right of access to the Sun-Temple and the help of your braves in building a medicine-lodge which shall be con-

structed as the air-spirits duly advise me. And it is further demanded, O Chief, that no man or woman of this tribe shall interfere with the big medicine I am about to work until the breath of life comes from the lips of Sookinook."

"Or the plans of Thunder-Bird are seen to come to naught," the squinting-eyed old chief gently reminded him.

"The Thunder-Bird never fails!" cried our pallid-faced leader.

"It is agreed, then," said Attapok, with the casually childlike suggestion that perhaps a cup or two of the white men's tea, well-sweetened with the white powder that slept soft on the tongue, might work a fitting conclusion to the ceremony.

"Boil a little Oolong for the old bird," muttered Pareso as he ushered Knutsson and me back through the temple door. "And the sooner we get this flummery over with the better. For after today, my friends, we've got something more than haranguing on our hands!"

CHAPTER NINE

THE EXILE FROM OUTSIDE

Pareso's preparations, I soon found, were to be both more elaborate and more prolonged than I had expected. Over many of them, it is true, he saw fit to throw a tinge of the ceremonial, so that while certain chosen men of the tribe labored contentedly in the construction of the mountainside medicine-lodge their women worked with equal willingness in the curing of fawn-skins and the weaving of their softest wool for the fashioning of garments ample enough for the body of Sookinook, garments, I might add, that were ornamented with disks and borders and buckles of yellow gold.

Yet Pareso, with all his air of quiet assurance, could not have been, at heart, as certain of results as he pretended. "*Jamais arrière!*" was his coolly

repeated proclamation, but he was not blind in his faith in the future. For while he was making ready the medicine-lodge, which he proposed to heat with cunningly contrived charcoal-stoves, he embarked on sundry surreptitious explorations of the upper mountain-ridges and snowfields, in the hope, he explained, of discovering there some possible path of escape back to the outer world, or, if that did not reveal itself, to choose some adequate hiding-place where we might possibly hold our own against an enemy who so easily outnumbered us.

I have suspected, more than once, that his absences were due to entirely different reasons, that he was secretly conferring with a camp follower sedulously hidden from our eyes. But I could never be sure. And even when not out on the trail, in those strange days, he showed a preference for being alone with his strange paraphernalia. I tried not to be unduly curious as he fashioned and scrubbed white his low and bier-like work-table and set his boiling-pots in place and patiently sterilized each article and utensil that entered his mysterious

lodge up in the shadow of Sookinook's mountain temple. And Knutsson labored with him, quietly and contentedly and touched with an odd intentness that tended, on certain occasions, to make me feel a bit of an outsider.

As time wore on, in fact, I was more and more impressed with a vague sense of approaching climax, just as I was depressed by a sharper conviction of impending calamity. So incredible and preposterous did the whole enterprise seem, indeed, that on my last secret meeting with Ota I had taken her in my arms, and looked into her face as one looks into the face of a lover one fears never to see again. She was quick enough to detect that change in my manner and held my own face between her small hands and quaveringly prayed that the beauty of Sookinook might never come between us.

"There's small chance of that!" I cried out in my accumulated bitterness, as she continued to hold my head so hungrily against her heaving young bosom.

"And you will always love me?" she implored.

"Always," I said. For the name of Sookinook, at the moment, meant nothing more to me than an ever-sharpening menace and peril. But about the slender body that trembled in my clasp was a human closeness and warmth, an endearing worldly frailness that made my heart ache for her. And I even nursed a suspicion that this might be the last time I should hear her voice and feel the weight of that softly rounded arm about my shoulder.

Yet Pareso himself, even in the face of his numerous makeshifts and expedients, continued to appear as cool headed and judicial as a surgeon in a completely equipped hospital, whatever his inner feelings may have been. And not wishing to be entirely outranked by Knutsson, who loomed more and more active in those preparatory rites, I tried to take the proper cue from my leader and face my appointed tasks with fortitude.

There was much of that enterprise, however, which I could not understand, just as I failed to see why I should be so sedulously scrubbed and steamed and arrayed in fresh clothing that had been

oven-baked like a rump-roast. This seemed doubly unnecessary when, as a final precaution, I was armed with a spear and posted at the plateau-edge to keep interfering trespassers away from the temple during the hazardous labor of releasing the white-bodied Sookinook from her prison of ice. All I got was a fleeting glimpse of something ponderous being carried into the medicine-lodge, of something stark and stiff as a frozen halibut, roughly covered by a rug, being tugged from one open door to another by two panting men.

I felt very much an outsider, during that long and anxious vigil, and as the hours dragged by I fretted more and more about that bald plateau-edge overlooking the valley where something sinister crept into the light reflected from topick and stream and wind-riffled lake. I was glad enough, in fact, when I heard Pareso calling me sharply from the doorway of the lodge. His arms were bare well above the elbows, and his face, I could see, was moist with a dewing of perspiration. And there was a note of urgency in his call that clearly enough

announced everything was not going so well as might have been expected.

I suppose it was the heat, more than anything else, that made me a little dizzy as I hurried in through the narrow door and closed it after me, for the air of that small chamber, quite outside its sharp odor of undistinguishable drugs, was as warm and heavy as a Swedish steam-cabinet. And what my inquiring eye rested on did not add to my quietness of spirit. I saw Knutsson, stripped to the waist, half reclining close beside and slightly above the low work-table. His great white arm was bound, and leading from that bandage was a small rubber tube to which Pareso's control-syringe was attached. This, in turn, was linked with another tube that led to a bandage about another arm, an arm that was whiter and rounder and softer than Knutsson's. And through that narrow canal, I could see, the warm blood from one reclining figure was being steadily poured into the other reclining figure, a long and strangely relaxed figure with the tumbled crown of moist gold about its head.

"Work this plunger," I heard Pareso's voice, thin and far-off, suddenly commanding me. "Do it slow and steadily. And count your strokes. When you come to a hundred, tell me."

I saw the barearmed man move to the foot of the bier-like table, where he thrust a couple of his hot-water bags made of goat's bladders in under the heavy robe of plaited deerskin. I saw him move to the head of the bier, where he stooped low as he lifted one flaccid and dusky-fringed eyelid and stared intently at the opaque, averted pupil that seemed to be eluding his inspection. I saw him throw back the covering of the long and relaxed body and place an ear over the rounded side where a heart should have been beating. And I heard his grunt of impatience as he began strange massaging movements of that rounded white torso.

It was then, and then only, that I seemed to realize the strangeness of the miracle taking place under my eyes, the audacity of the man who was defying the ages and snatching life out of death. It became human to me, for the first time, that cold

body which had slept through the centuries, which had defied dissolution and change, which had remained rounded and youthful and superb while the rest of its world had grown old, while everything it had touched and known and yearned toward had fallen slowly away into the engulfing mists of the past. And as I pumped that tiny river of warm blood from one blond body into another I began to see why Pareso had brought with him this great hulk of a man who held life singing in every vein and capillary of his colossal body. I understood then why Knutsson was there. He had been carried along, I felt, as little more than a bladder of blood, a vessel full of warm and red-colored fluid to be transfused into the empty veins awaiting his gift. It was through him that a second birth was being given to the sleeping blond figure under the deer-robe, an unparalleled and agonizing second birth out of a reluctant womb of ice. For as I looked at the giant Swede I saw the change that had already taken place on his contented face. The earlier glow of vitality had gone from that face. It had grown

paler and thinner, and, to my excited mind, even the great muscled body seemed to have dwindled and blanched. Yet deep in his pupils I could see the central fire of some persistent emotional exaltation that still burned within him. He seemed happy, absurdly happy, as the slender canal that ran from radial artery to median vein carried away its equally slender rivulet of corpuscles.

"How are you feeling?" I heard Pareso ask as he swept him with a hurried side-glance.

"I'm all right," Knutsson said through lips that had lost most of their earlier ruddiness. He complained of thirst, however, from time to time, and as Pareso resumed charge of the syringe-plunger he curtly ordered me to give Knutsson a drink.

"He'll need plenty of that," announced the busy surgeon as his glance turned to a graduated dial with a fluctuating needle that I neither knew nor understood. And his voice seemed farther away than ever as he explained that this sensation of thirst in a donor was natural enough, since the rapid absorption of fluid from the tissues into the blood

set up a compensatory call for water at such a time. But something about Knutsson's face, for all its slumberous look of content, began to disturb me.

"What are *you* afraid of?" Pareso suddenly and almost angrily demanded of me. And I could feel his quick look of scorn, like a whip in my face.

"I don't like the way he looks," I said with a head-nod toward the drooping blond giant.

"I guess he's happier than you are," snapped Pareso, though I noticed that he was working the little plunger much more slowly.

"He's going to faint," I cried as I caught a tremulous movement of the blond eyelids at the same time that the body slumped lower in its supporting hammock of rawhide.

"Take this," called Pareso as he summoned me back to the transfusion instrument. What he did, after that, I could not see, for my back was turned to him.

"Is she coming?" I heard Knutsson's oddly thinned and infinitely languid voice ask out of the silence.

"Not yet," was the other's abstracted reply. "But this fire has got to burn," he panted. "It's got to burn now or never!"

I could see the frown deepen on his sweat-covered face and a new look of anxiety in his eyes as he glanced at the crumpled-up Knutsson, who looked no more like the living than did the relaxed white figure on the bier.

"You've killed him!" I gasped.

"Shut up!" cried Pareso, pushing me roughly aside. But he called out to me, sharply, to give a hand in lifting the inert Knutsson to the far side of the lodge, where he was covered with a goat-skin blanket and a little *cognac* was poured down his throat.

Then Pareso, with a light in his eye not at all to my liking, caught me by the arm and dragged me to the head of the bier.

"Do you want to see her live?" he demanded, turning the sleeping face about with a roughness that I resented.

I looked down into that sleeping face, with its

shadowing crown of gold, with its closed eyes in which so many mysteries reposed, with the pathetically curving line of the lips that seemed to be pleading for life again. And the queenly beauty of it warmed my blood as wine might, warmed my blood and gave me a touch of the same reckless courage that had served to turn the sleeping Knutsson from a lusty and care-free animal into a martyr forgetful of sense and self.

"D'you want her brought back?" repeated Pareso, knuckling the relaxed jaw open and making sure the tongue had not fallen back into the throat.

"Can it be done?" I cried as I touched the coils of massed hair as bright as gold itself.

"If you'll do what Knutsson has done," was Pareso's answer.

I was in his hands, I knew, even before I agreed to that oblique demand. Our safety, I remembered, depended on that venture. Our very lives, in a way, hung on its outcome. Unless breath came to that unnaturally quiet body there was every

promise that it would be quickly enough taken out of our own.

"I'm willing," I announced.

I had braced myself for pain. But I experienced none. I was merely a little light-headed from the heat of the chamber and the thought, as bracing as old brandy, that I was carrying animation to inanimate glory, that I was contributing to this miracle of bringing life out of death, that I was helping to crown the imperishable with our dubious gift of the perishable.

I had scant knowledge of what Pareso was doing. But I could hear his gasps of effort, his low cry of hope, his louder groan of defeat. I could hear a sort of frantic prayer burst from his lips as he set to work again. More than ever his voice sounded thin and far-away, for I was weak, I imagine, from overtried nerves and loss of blood.

How long he worked over that pallid blond figure I had no means of knowing. Whether it was a matter of minutes or hours I could never tell, for I lost all track of time in a sudden great weariness.

I must have fainted away. When I opened my eyes again Pareso's face seemed to float before me in a mist and his voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"Is she alive?" I asked in a quavering whisper, watching him as he stooped over the bier-like table.

"She's alive," he wearily retorted. But there was no triumph in his voice. Instead of exultation it merely held an abstracted sort of weariness. And when he turned back to the deerskin draped figure, after pouring warm goat's milk with a dash of *cognac* down my throat, I noticed two things. One was a great tress of hair, lying vivid gold on the lodge floor, a tress obviously cut from the impassive head on the bier. The other was the fact that this head was closely wrapped in bandages, like a turban. But I gave it little thought, at the time, for my still languid eyes were arrested by the steady rise and subsidence of the rounded bosom against which Pareso was pressing an anxious ear.

"She'll live," he wearily proclaimed.

CHAPTER TEN

THE PILGRIM SOUL

How long I lay there, in my later sleep of exhaustion, was always beyond my power to determine. But it was daylight when I woke again. The air in the lodge was both fresher and cooler than I last remembered it, and I could see Pareso still sitting beside the bier-like table draped with its robes of deerskin, sitting with a protruding white wrist resting in his hand. It wasn't until I blinked at him a second time that I discovered he was reading the pulse that throbbed in the satin-white forearm beside him. It even startled me to see a faint heave and twist of the tall body and to hear from the dreaming lips a low sound that could be called neither a moan nor a sigh. Pareso was stooping over her, the next moment, apparently pouring a

little of his warm goat's milk with *cognac* down the unwilling throat. There was a vague gentleness on his sharp-lined face as he stooped there, studying the face which I could not see. And he sighed, almost contentedly, as he resumed his seat, with his chin resting on his hand and his elbow in turn resting on his knee. He looked old and worn and inexpressibly tired, with blue-gray shadows under his ruminative deep-set eyes. I was startled, the next moment, to see a paroxysm pass through the sleeping figure and a cry break from the half-conscious lips. And as I lay there, with the sound of that strange voice still in my ears, I fell to wondering where the owner of that voice had come from and what she carried back with her. Would she be a child again, with only the impulses and the incapacities of the newly born? Would memory still live in that awakened brain? And if the golden body once more housed a soul where had that soul come from? Would that long sleep, when she had fully awakened, be burdened with the weight of its centuries? Or, since sleep is sleep and since the

unconscious mind can bear no record of time, might it not be merely like waking from a night's slumber to the light of another morning?

Pareso himself must have been pondering over somewhat the same questions, for as he gazed down at the bandaged blond head I could see a puzzled look on his tired face, a look of uncertainty touched with mounting disquiet. It was as his glance slued about, to study the still sleeping Knutsson, that he saw I was awake.

He came over and stood beside me, fraternally, with one hand on my shoulder.

"You're feeling better?" he said after a quick look into my face. His voice was weak but kindly. And never did I seem as close to him as I did at that moment, while he stood there, in an aura of loneliness, reaching out a forlorn hand, apparently, for a familiar human contact.

I gazed at the woman who lay there before us in such an unnatural calm. And still again it seemed incredible that the machinery of life in the body under the deerskin robe should be making

that robe rise and fall with the regular breathing of her rounded bosom.

"Will she live?" I asked in a whisper.

"She's *got* to live," said Pareso with a new note of passion in his voice. "And she will. She will, now, with our help. And you'll be doing your part if you'll keep watch here, while I get a little rest. Can you?"

I assured him that I could.

"Call me if anything happens. And keep an eye on Karl. I had to drain the poor beggar a little drier than I intended." A ghost of a smile played about Pareso's lips as he gazed down at me. "And I had to take more out of *you* than I wanted to."

I realized that fact when, after Pareso was off on his much-needed sleep, I moved dizzily across the lodge to get a drink for Knutsson, who grunted and promptly lapsed off into slumber again. I was glad enough to sink back into the seat beside the silent figure and rest there until my pulse grew quieter and the ringing went from my ears.

Then, swayed by a slowly accumulating curiosity, I found the energy to lean forward and study the shadowy face under its turban of white. I could see the violet shadows below the thickly planted lashes that swept the ivory-smooth cheek, the rhythm of a pulse in the softly rounded neck, the delicate stippling of small lines that marked the curved lips slightly puckered with the relaxation of weariness. Then I leaned closer, staring once more down at the dusk-lidded eyes that had been shut for so long from the light of heaven. I was idly enough speculating as to the color of those eyes, as to their expression when they opened, as to the loneliness that would surely lie there when they looked out on their new surroundings, when the breast so close under my shoulder heaved with a deeper breath that was almost a sigh and the heavy lids so near my stooping face slowly opened.

They opened as doors open, revealing a blue sky beyond. For as I stared down into those unfocused mild eyes I saw the bluest blue I had ever looked into, the blue of the turquoise without its

tinge of violet, the blue of the corn-flower intensified into a burning azure, the blue of cyanin softened with a trace of the gentian.

They seemed too intent on their struggle with the new-found mystery of light, at first, to see either me or my sudden movement of astonishment. They were absorbed, apparently, in the mere sensation of vision, in the uncomprehended miracle of light, shadow and movement making itself known. It was not until their glance grew intelligent and focused and controlled that they turned slowly and studied my face.

I could see the unuttered question in their depths, the mild and brooding wonder at the core of each pool of azure. For those eyes seemed to be asking, as plain as words could have put it: "Who are you?"

And I, in my predicament, found no answer ready for that question. I could only fall to stroking the white hand that lay outside the deer-robe, stroking it slowly and reassuringly, as I have seen a mother stroke a hurt child, or a rider stroke a

nervous horse. I even felt slightly abashed before the gaze of those eyes, as though they held a reproach against which I had no defense.

Yet when I fell to stroking the white hand again those eyes of burning blue were no longer on my face, but were staring up with a more meditative light in their depths, with a faint frown of introspection furrowing the golden brows above them. And I knew as I looked at them that they were now asking a second question, a question which, had it been put into words, could only have been: "Who am I?"

That problem seemed too deep for their probing, for after a time they closed again, slowly and wearily, and I knew by the quieted breathing of the broad bosom that the half-awakened spirit had once more slipped off into slumber.

The time and the care it took to nurse that hesitating spirit back to its full vigor is a matter I need not here recount in detail. But there were many factors, I found, to Pareso's advantage. Not the least important of these, I feel, was the superb ani-

mal strength of that heroically molded figure. And another, I'm equally sure, was that clean and tonic mountain air which held none of the corruption of earth's more crowded places. And still another, of course, was the skill and knowledge and patience of that strange man who seemed the repository of the wisdom of the ages tangled up with the naïveté of a child.

Yet from then on it was anything but plain sailing. For newer troubles were brewing beyond our lodge doors. And the first intimation of these came with the appearance of a body of spear-men headed by Attapok himself, with Pennekuk at his side. The latter two worthies, I observed, stood with our Fire-Sticks in their hands. And when the old chief demanded that Pareso present himself to their view they both, obviously acting in accordance with a prearranged plan, promptly pointed the glistening revolvers at Pareso's body and pulled the triggers.

Those Fire-Sticks, of course, were empty, and nothing much resulted from the movement. On Attapok's old face, indeed, I could see both won-

der and disappointment at the discovery that the Thunder-Bird could not be thus magically struck down by his own instrument of death. In the excitement, however, I had sense enough to wrest the firearm from the old chief's fingers and drop back through the lodge door, where I promptly filled the empty chambers.

I was none too quick in my movements, for as I stepped out into the open again I saw one of the spear-men, larger and more malignant-faced than the others, break from the line and with his ugly long-headed lance balanced for striking, charge straight for the helpless Pareso.

I shot from the half-arm, having no time for more deliberate aim. But my bullet caught him in the leg and sent him sprawling and tumbling down the icy slope, where he lay in a heap.

His unlooked-for fall, I could see, had thrown the fear of God into that wavering line. It held them where they stood and caused even the scowling Pennekuk to retreat to the back of that sheltering group, where, I noticed, he secreted the remaining

revolver beneath the fur of his parka. But that brief armistice gave Pareso a chance to harangue the huddled group and explain that his power had not failed him, that mastery over life and death still remained in his hands, and that Sookinook, the Woman Who Couldn't Die, was indeed a living and happy being, warm with the breath of life.

"That's a lie!" cried Pennekuk from his rear line of warriors. "For if she lived she would step forth and confront us."

But Pareso's patience did not give way.

"The new soul that reposes in her body, my friends," he patiently explained, "has traveled a great distance and is still weary, even as the wings of a bird which has flown night and day for a moon are weary. But it is meet that you should now look upon her with your own eyes and behold her in her living beauty."

So at an appointed hour, when the medicine-lodge had been put to rights, old Attapok and his under-chiefs were permitted to file solemnly in through the door, one by one, circle about the long

couch draped with deerskin, and look upon the face of their living Sookinook. That face, slightly flushed with fever, now held a beauty that could easily be accepted as unearthly. And as the tribesmen one by one touched the warm body, to make sure of its reality, a childlike look of awe came into the doubting eyes and a new air of reverence crept into their movements.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LINES OF COMMUNICATION

Two weeks later, when Pareso concluded that the more equable valley air would be better for his patient, a litter with long carrying-poles was carefully constructed and with much ceremonial the new queen was transported to the concourse temple that had been made ready for her. Yet she knew little of either this change or of the homage that was being bestowed upon her, for, even after her fever passed away, she remained in the clutch of a sustained deep lassitude that left her satisfied to sleep and waken for nourishment and then fall asleep again.

"That's only the clock winding up again," explained Pareso when I spoke to him on this matter. "The anabolic processes, under such conditions,

must be slow at first. Even the Pskof peasants of Russia who practise partial hibernation, I've noticed, take considerable time to get back to normal."

"But there's the other side of the problem," I pointed out. "Supposing, for example, you've brought back the empty shell of a body, without a mind inside it?"

Pareso laughed at my fears.

"You needn't worry about that. It's there, as surely as the endosperm is in the wheat-berry. And what's more, I've had actual evidence of it. Twice, now, Thera has spoken to me."

"Thera?" I echoed.

"This woman's name is Thera," he reminded me, "and we may as well get used to it. She's Thera, the daughter of Olaf of Hordoland!"

It was easy enough to say. But the question of that head-bandage still bothered me. And I kept thinking of the blond woman in the wilderness chalet, the silent woman I had seen through the mists of fever. I remembered the ghostly figure I had seemed to see, still later, amid the final de-

lirium of our journey. And I remembered Pareso's allusion to the false Minerva once known as Phya.

But I tried to dismiss those thoughts. I wanted to believe in Thera. I had a craving to accept her, even as that lost tribe was accepting her, even as the rapt-eyed Ota had accepted her. For the sister of Pennekuk, because of her earlier association with the Temple of the Golden Eagle, had already been set apart as a sort of priestess and attendant to the new goddess. A movable throne-seat, as comfortable as a Bath-chair when cushioned and draped with furs, had been solemnly constructed for Thera; and in this, day by day, she was carried out to the dais in front of the temple, where the people, her people, left at the feet of their miraculously reclaimed Sookinook increasingly generous gifts of metal and meat and milk and raiment. And as that stately stranger gathered strength there in the tonic northern air a richer coloring came into the tired eyes of brooding blue. Hour by hour she would sit watching the clouds that drifted across the sky, watching the deepening gold of the afternoon sun, watching

the leaves in the wind, watching the banners and streamers of the Northern Lights when they showed green and opal and orange beyond the snowy mountains with the wine-glow still lingering on their topmost crests. In her face, at such times, I could detect neither happiness nor unhappiness; she seemed more lost in a formless and languid abstraction of spirit from which, now and then, she would emerge to the extent of uttering a sigh that did not altogether seem a sigh of regret.

But one pearl-misted afternoon when Ota was quietly combing the heavy mass of wheat-colored hair, from which the bandaging turban had finally been removed, a look of perplexity came into the meditative eyes and the rose-petal lips spoke a quiet word or two.

What she said, of course, neither Ota nor I could decipher. Nor could we by sign or movement prompt her to speak again. But even that momentary emergence from the mists about her left me strangely stirred, strangely anxious for some further bridging of the abyss. And from

that day forward the look of world-strangeness seemed to fade slowly from those eyes of luminous blue. As this woman called Thera became more conscious of her surroundings, of the sun that warmed her, of the mountains that shadowed her, of us who tended her, her face grew animated with a new responsiveness that seemed to bring her closer to those around her.

And all of us, after our own fashion, grew fond of her. That was an end from which there seemed to be no escape. It was inevitable and preordained, for beauty demands its earthly tribute of adoration. Knutsson's dumb worship, naturally, was plainer to the eye than was Pareso's half-speculative devotion touched with the persistent intellectual curiosity of the scientist. Through all of Ota's quick-handed service ran a thread of awe, a primitive strain of sheer idolatry, as though she were the handmaiden not of a mortal woman but of the true Daughter of the Sun come down to earth. And as for myself, I came to love that queenly stranger as one loves pure beauty made precious by some complicating

gift of mystery. She might never stand as companionably close to me, I felt, as did the quick-eyed and warm-bodied Ota, Ota who hungered for human contact and accepted my kisses with little cooing laughs of delight. But Thera was different. She was something above and beyond us. She seemed, in her superbness, to be a myth made manifest, to be trailing clouds of glory that could not be lightly stirred and could never be completely penetrated.

That softer interlude, however, was not destined to be of long duration. For on the midnight after Thera's first unaided journey across the concourse and back I was awakened by a noise not far from our new sleeping-quarters in the temple-wing. I felt, in my first moment of alarm, that it might be some danger threatening Ota, who now slept in a small chamber next to the quarters which Knutsson had surrendered to Thera. When I forced open the door made of buckskin laced over a frame of spruce-wood, however, I found the girl safe in bed. So, arming myself with the remaining revolver and

Pareso's flash-light, I stood waiting in the darkness, oppressed by a nameless sense of peril.

I remembered, as I waited there, that vague but persistent sense of being spied on, of being secretly watched, which had oppressed me from my earliest days in the land of Ota. And when a betraying small noise repeated itself from the other side of the temple I was in no mood for hesitation. I thrust Ota behind me and advanced until I was persuaded we stood practically at the source of that noise. And when an unmistakably human grunt sounded directly in front of me I switched on the light. As I did so I found myself staring into the startled face of Pennekuk, who reached for his hunting-knife at the same moment that I reached for my revolver. In the temple corner beside him lay Pareso's buckskin belt, with the cartridge-pouch attached to it slit open.

Had it not been for Ota, I think I should have shot that intruder where he stood. But I heard the small cry of the girl close behind me and felt the clasp of her fingers on my arm. So instead of

putting a bullet through the embattled Pennekuk, I held him flattened against the wall where he gabbled in his unknown tongue to the equally garrulous Ota. I could see her open his hand and from it take three or four of Pareso's precious cartridges.

"What does all this mean?" I demanded.

"He says," explained Ota, "that it was the wish of Attapok."

"What is the wish of Attapok?"

"Attapok," was Ota's answer, "desired the smoke-eggs that fitted into the throat of the Fire-Stick, that he might see for all time if the Thunder-Bird, and the big Fire-God, and also if Sookinook herself, were truly spirits of the air. And even more especially you, O Fire-Stone. It was his intention to make that test."

"What test?" I demanded.

"The test that is mightier than much talk," explained the girl. "For if you were true spirits, he contends, the Fire-Stick would be harmless against you. If you were but men and women, however, you would die as did Olaka's ewe-sheep on the day

when you first stood before the Temple of the Golden Eagle."

So completely disturbing was this message that I released my hold on the now silent Pennekuk.

"And would you have allowed this Fire-Stick to bark at your Sookinook?" I demanded.

"What evil, O Fire-Stone, could befall her, being truly one of the air-spirits?"

"We'll talk about that later," I countered, knowing how thin was the ice on which we stood. "As for Pennekuk here, I see where we'll have much to say to each other. But before that takes place tell your brother I have no wish to work him evil."

"Pennekuk," I heard the girl say in the darkness. But there was no answer to her call.

"Where is he?" I asked, wheeling my flashlight about in the darkness.

"He is gone!" said the tremulous small voice at my side. "And O Fire-Stone, something tells me this will spell evil for you and the Thunder-Bird, for I know the thoughts in Pennekuk's heart are black thoughts and his words are unholy words."

"What," I asked, "were his words?"

"He said, O Fire-Stone," was the whispered reply, "that you and the new Fire-God and the Thunder-Bird are no more holy than three old he-goats who might wander down from across the outer hills!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

WOMEN AND THE LOVE OF WOMEN

WHILE to the casual eye, the life of our valley tribe went on as before, I was not altogether unconscious of some subtle and disturbing change in the spirit of the people about me. I couldn't rid myself of a sense of subterranean activities, of secret distrusts and conspiracies being woven beyond our narrow circle of knowledge. Daily, at dawn and dusk, the drums sounded and the people assembled in the smooth-trodden concourse for the rites that were expected of them. Morning by morning the men went forth in their quest of fur and food, of metal and wood; and day by day the women gathered their wild-fowl eggs and cured hides and smoked fish and ground meal from dried roots and the berries of what seemed a stunted

variety of wild rice. The children played about the lanes of the village and the old men made animal-traps and hunting-weapons and in the long evenings Koomiak, the tribal poet who had only one eye and a face as wrinkled as a winter apple, intoned his sagas to the music of a keelon, telling how the old days were the days of heroes and high adventure.

As for Pareso himself, he seemed to be off on never-ending reconnaissances about the outer fringe of the valley. He claimed to be looking for a more adequate supply of copper, being anxious to teach the tribe an easier method of tempering and hardening their tools, by a proper mixture of that latter metal with their native gold.

Yet all the while, I know, he was making a careful appraisal of that little kingdom's wealth in gold and oil at the same time that he was carrying on a guarded search for some gateway to the outer world. The time came, in fact, when he preferred to have Knutsson go along with him on these furtive excursions, and day after day, the two strange fig-

ures would lose themselves in those remoter canyons and slopes over which still hung the taboo of the tribesmen about us.

To me, accordingly, fell the task of teaching Thera the first rudiments of the English language, which she learned slowly and with the studious intentness of a child. By this time, too, she had learned the use of the needle and she was happiest, I think, when seated in the thin northern sunlight fashioning some garment for her own wear. She was especially proud of a sort of flowing parka or ahtee which she made for herself, a parka fashioned out of the finest of white-fox skins. But the thing that most puzzled me was her emergence from weakness to strength. Her color deepened with sun and open air, but never once did her skin lose its magnolia-like creaminess. A deeper luster, too, seemed to creep into the gold of her hair, and Ota showed me, one day, how the combed-out strands could be made to swing a full hand's width below the knee. Another thing that amazed me, once health returned to that superb and supple body of

Thera's, was her sheer physical strength. She looked like a goddess. There was no doubt of that. But, in another way, she seemed very much a woman. She was, for instance, almost as primitive as Ota in her casual disregard of clothing, in her childlike uncovering of her body when clothes irked her, in the unconcern of the eyes of others when she bathed or when she slept. She knew that she was beautiful; and she had a woman's instinctive knowledge of the power of beauty.

I can still remember how, at the end of one of our lessons, she watched a wild goose fly overhead, watched it as it crossed the valley and disappeared from sight.

"Tell me," she said in her halting English, "where did I come from?"

That sudden question sent a needling of apprehension through my body. How much she should be told was not easy to determine.

"From across the sea," I finally answered.

"It must have been long ago," she mused aloud.

"Yes," I agreed. "It was long ago."

I don't know how sincere she was in that forgetfulness. But she did not seem given to duplicity. Her attitude toward the tribe that surrounded her, for example, was frankly one of indifference. She accepted their tribute, in her own detached and smiling way, but there were times when she went through the essential temple-rites as absently as a vagabond-actor going through a too familiar rôle. One day, after a sort of fête-day ceremonial, I heard her murmur: "These tow-headed sheep, they tire me!"

But one much more memorable day, when we were alone in the quietness of the concourse temple, Thera, after pacing idly back and forth, turned and studied me with her eyes of burning blue.

"Why are you afraid of me, David?" she quietly inquired.

I could feel the color, before that candid gaze, come and go in my face.

"I am not afraid of you," I protested.

"But you hold me at arm's length, like these fish-eating Eskimos," she complained in her grop-

ing new tongue. "You don't look on me as though I were quite human."

"I respect you," I began. "I——"

But she cut me short, with a low and human enough rill of laughter.

"No woman," she said with a body-movement of *ennui*, "cares to be looked up to like a statue in a niche. I'm not—not entirely made of marble. I'm alive. And I'm lonely."

"I'll always be your friend," was my respectful enough answer to that.

But she sighed as she studied my face.

"I want more than friendship," she said as she sank down on her fur-draped throne-seat. "And we live but once."

That chilled me, knowing what I knew, like a breath from a tomb.

"There are those who live more than once," I found the courage to remind her.

She turned back to me, at that, with her ruminative blue eyes on my face.

"But there are those who have never lived,"

she contended. I could see her body heave with a deeper sigh. "Come closer to me," she quietly commanded.

I went, obediently enough. But I was no longer thinking of tombs. And my heart beat faster as she reached out a hand and put it on my shoulder.

"Am I so ugly?" she demanded with her wintry smile.

"You are beautiful," I proclaimed, my heart pounding my ribs. But at the moment, I wasn't thinking of Thera the daughter of Olaf. I was thinking more of Olga Shashkov, the shadowed woman of silence, the woman of dark and unknown destinies.

"I am lonely," she murmured as she thrust her fingers through the hair of my drooping head, "and I need love."

She was regally and mysteriously beautiful. And I was merely a mortal. And the outcome of everything about me, at the moment, seemed as uncertain and phantasmal as life on the eve of a great battle.

"I would die for you," I cried, with a quaver of abandonment.

But still again I saw the wintry smile on her face.

"No, David, not that," she demurred. "I'd rather you lived for me. Couldn't you—couldn't you learn to love me a little?"

"I do love you," I whispered, feeling the warmth of her body drooping toward me. And again her breast heaved with its hungry breath.

"Then kiss me," was her answering whisper as she relaxed in my arms, with her eyes closed.

All memory of time and place went out, like a lamp. I forgot the soft-voiced Ota. I forgot Pareso and Knutsson. I forgot temples and tribes and the accumulating perils that surrounded a band of travel-worn exiles. I merely remembered that an incomparably beautiful woman, hungry for love, lay passive in my clasp.

And I emerged from that engulfing trance only at the sound of Ota's voice, calling out my name.

I had to steady myself against the chair-arm, as

I turned and looked at the slender-bodied girl. There was neither anger nor reproof in her eyes. Her face, however, was colorless. And her hands also shook a little, I observed, as she held out a comb, made of beaten gold, to the silent Thera.

"This," she quietly affirmed, "has just been fashioned and sent to you by Karl."

"By Karl?" I echoed, astonished by the harshness of my own voice.

"By him you speak of as Karl Knutsson," was Ota's impassive reply.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE WAYWARD FLESH

IT MUST have been about this time that I noticed a marked change in both my fellow-adventurers. Pareso, for some reason, became daily more morose and self-immured. The big-bodied Knutsson, on the other hand, lost his earlier touch of sullenness. He no longer complained, but seemed to walk in a fog of abstraction. His step grew lighter and he became happier in spirit. And rarely did his old restlessness break through that Indian summer of resignation.

This puzzled me, from time to time. Then, quite by accident, I stumbled on the key that had unlocked the door of change.

I discovered it one moonlit night when, looking for Ota, I went to the lake called the Pool of Laughing Shores, where the wind-riffled water sang on

the gravelly banks beneath a gently sloping grove of white birches. This grove seemed ghostly by night, with the slender white boles standing like a thousand sentinels in the dappled light. But in a more open space toward the center of the grove I caught the movement of a figure and as promptly accepted it as Ota's. I hesitated, however, wondering how I could creep up on the musing girl without startling her into flight.

Then I moved still closer through the mottled moonlight. And a moment later I discovered my mistake. For the figure of the woman with the averted face was not Ota's. It was Thera's; and she was not alone. Before her, I could now see, kneeled Knutsson. His arms were clasped about her knees and his face was upturned to hers. There was, too, something regal in her posture as she sat on a lichened rock with her right arm swung forward and her fingers thrust deep in the tawny mass of that huge Swede's hair. She seemed to be studying his upturned face, studying it with a prolonged and wistful stare that ended in a sigh.

"Perhaps you are right," I could hear her say. "I too have felt that way. There seems so little left now, except what we can give ourselves."

"We have no right to fight against it," responded the unexpectedly softened voice of the man beside her.

"It is not that, Karl," was the woman's quiet answer. "But what is there to matter, now? What is there to matter, in all the wide world? Everything has gone. I am so alone, so alone that my blood grows cold, when I think of it, in the night."

"Then come with me," cried Knutsson, with a tighter clasp of the stooping blond body.

"But where could we go?" asked Thera, taking a deeper breath.

"I'll find a way out," he protested.

"And betray Carlo?" she asked.

"We have our own right to live."

"Carlo," she reminded him, "might say the same."

"Then you still think of that man?" challenged Knutsson, a new note of jealousy in his voice.

"Not as I think of you," she reminded him. "But he is my master. And without him, I would not be here."

Knutsson stood up in the mottled shadow and splashes of silver. He looked Titanic and rugged and rude, in his partly furred parka. Yet he seemed kinglier, in his Gothlike hugeness, than I had thought him capable of looking. And, reluctant as I was to admit it, there appeared something almost noble in his bearing.

"But what is life in a Polar wilderness like this?" he demanded. "What can you get out of being a human totem-pole to a tribe of white-headed Indians who'll murder us all in our sleep when the time is ripe? And why should we go on like this, week by week and month by month, when there's a different world calling for us, a world that isn't a world of fish-eating savages, but——"

"Perhaps I belong more to that world of fish-eating savages," interrupted the woman with the regal crown of gold that was glimmering so warm in the moonlight.

"You belong to me," cried the tawny giant confronting her. "And once we're back in our right world we can be happy."

"But it's a long way back to our right world," the mournful-voiced woman reminded him.

Knutsson, apparently, did not understand her as she meant to be understood.

"It's worth the try," he averred.

I could not hear everything he said, but I knew he was telling her of lands where it was always summer, lands where snow and ice were unknown and birds sang and flowers were for ever in bloom. And as I sat in the mist-filtered northern moonlight I thought of Thera on a copra-schooner, beating about palm-fringed islands lashed by the Trades, creeping into beryl-watered harbors with rusty wharf-sheds, with the swart bare-chested Knutsson at the wheel and her own regal body, browned by wind and sun, scantily clad in faded dungaree, probably patched and none too clean, and with a tow-headed child or two clinging to her skirts. I could see the gold faded from her heavily coiled

hair and the queenliness gone from the superb blond body with the skin that was now as smooth as magnolia petals and the old ineffable composure vanishing from the watching face as she waited beside a malodorous string-piece for her mate to come back to her, to come back from the trader's island, rolling a little as he walked and singing the songs I had once heard him singing in a city on the St. Lawrence. I could see him, in my mind's eye, obese and rubicund and with a fresh bottle of gin under his arm, rolling back to his ship, and to his woman, who had once been the daughter of mystery.

I could picture it all, but I could not conceive of it as possible. It seemed as incongruous as the thought of a goddess out of Scandinavian mythology stepping into a suburban trolley-car.

Yet Thera, I was reminded as I once more heard her voice through the quiet moonlight, was still a woman, a woman warm with the currents that swayed other women.

"We may not be right, Karl," she was saying,

"but I feel I have much lost time to make up for, that I have been cheated, in some way. That's about all I can remember."

"All I want to remember," contended Knutsson, "is that I'm here beside you and that you are beautiful."

She seemed to catch her breath, at that, for she turned her head slowly toward him again and a dreamier intonation came into her voice.

"Am I beautiful?" she asked. "Am I, to you, truly beautiful?" And those words had a familiar ring to them.

"You are so beautiful," answered the man I had reason to regard as merely a drunken sailor with the soul of an animal, "you are so beautiful that my heart aches and my blood runs hot at the touch of your hand."

I could see Thera place her hands on his shoulders and study the face so close to her, as she had done with my own. I could even see her eyes close and her body relax as it swayed a trifle toward him in the moonlight.

"Then kiss me," she commanded. Yet she spoke so softly that it seemed little more than a whisper. And then I could see the two misty silhouettes move and meet in the dusk. I could see the two heroically proportioned and motionless bodies cling together and the two heads of gold bend so close that they met and merged and made one mass of misty tawniness in the pale light between the ghostly birch-boles. . . .

I turned and crept away, indeterminately sick at heart, depressed by a feeling of betrayal, of being cheated and deceived by those who stood closest about me. I felt friendless and alone in a world that seemed little more than a walking nightmare.

I tried to persuade myself that Knutsson was a deserter, a renegade to the cause he had sworn to support. But, try as I might, I could not write him down as an utterly bad man. He was, after all, merely human, merely hungry for his earthly share of happiness.

But there were others, I remembered, who had an equal right to happiness. And as I crept for-

ward through the spectral northern half-light and met Ota at the edge of the sleeping village I knew a forlorn sense of companionship in feeling the loyal pressure of her fingers as her hand sought and found mine in the silence.

"You are cold," she whispered.

"Where is Pareso?" I asked, trying to steady my voice.

"He sleeps," was the answer. "And, oh, Fire-Stone, it has been lonely here without you!"

It seemed an old cry, a familiar cry, the reminiscent cry of all the world against the desolation of life. And with an impulse of compassion, of compassion for her and for myself, I took the soft-bodied girl in my arms and held her close. And that too, I remembered, seemed tragically like life as a whole, for some darker ghost at my side whispered that this was not life's best love that lay in the hollow of my hand, but merely the second-best that the passing moments had offered.

"Your heart," complained Ota in a voice like a sleepy bird's, "is as cold as your hands."

"There is a thing or two," I said as my eye fell on Thera's empty throne-seat, "that troubles my mind." And I sat silent a moment. "Ota," I finally resumed, "they say there's no gateway between this valley home of yours and the world that lies beyond it. But if, somehow, somewhere, a door should be found through which we could escape to that outer world, would you come with me?"

I could feel the small breast heave with a great breath.

"Wherever you went," she murmured, "there too I would go. Even though it led me through snow and loneliness and made me walk with hunger and cold, even though it took me for ever from my home and carried me far from the topicks of my own people!"

I was not without a fragile but fortifying feeling, as she spoke, that other men besides Knutsson could snatch at their fleeting moments of glory.

"Listen," I said as I glanced up at the misty white mountain-fangs that bit like hungry teeth into the dusky flank of the horizon. "If we can find a

pass through those mountains, if we can discover a trail somewhere between those peaks, will you come with me?"

"As I have said," replied Ota, "I will go with you. But it is a path of danger, and for even you, O Fire-Stone, it would be hard to find."

I stopped short at that speech of hers.

"Have you, at any time, in any way, ever heard of such a path?"

"It seems misty, like a dream," was the girl's retarded reply. "But it was old Koomiak who in my childhood once talked of such a gateway. He was punished for it and told to sing of more sensible things. And the very old women, at night, used to tell of one Opalotok, a great hunter, who defied the devils of the Bad Lands and crossed the upper peaks and came back in a year's time with seven black scalps on his belt and a load of walrus-ivory on his shoulders."

Still again I sat silent, digesting the words that might mean so little or so much.

"And are such things still talked about, in secret?"

"It is against the law of our people to talk of such things," explained Ota. "But where the fire lies deep it is not easy to smother the smoke."

"Then could you quietly, by going back to these old women, the wise old women who remember so many things the rest of the world forgets, find out for me any hearsay as to that secret gateway? Any rumor or crumb of truth about it?"

Slowly the girl shook her head.

"It would lead only into danger," she averred.

"But not counting that," I persisted, "would you do it for me?"

"I would do anything for you, O Fire-Stone," she said as her glance met mine in the moonlight.

"You could do nothing," I said with one hand on her tawny head, "that would leave me more in your debt, or help me more in my trouble!"

Yet as we stood up side by side and she wavered and melted into my arms, the memory of how two other figures had melted and merged together in the same moonlight pushed slowly through my breast, a spear-head of pain that seemed reaching for my heart.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PACING THE CAGE

It was Kiooka, sometimes known to the tribe as the Grumbling Giant, who shortly after that thrust himself so unlooked for into the tenor of our plans. He opened his mouth of fire and spake, and shocked us into momentary silence.

Now Kiooka, I must explain, was a quiescent volcanic peak that towered a trifle more sullen-faced than his brothers among the cordilleras of the Alaskan peninsula. In the old days, according to the traditions of the tribe, it had vomited fire and smoke without cessation. But the snows, of late, had piled closer about its inactive crater and the glacial-ice had thickened along its side. So when the Grumbling Giant spoke again out of his long silence the unrest of Kiooka was accepted as a sign

that the higher gods were none too well pleased with the inhabitants of the valley under his shadow.

It seemed natural enough, accordingly, when the Grumbling Giant stirred in his sleep that old Attapok should make his appearance at the temple door. He came both plumed with a new importance and armed with the suggestion that special ceremonies be enacted to appease the evil ones responsible for the disturbance. But Pareso, who had other plans afoot, showed little enthusiasm for any such rites.

"I'm sick of this trumpery," he announced when the furtive-eyed Attapok had taken his grumbling departure. And Pareso, as he stared about at the barricading peaks and walls that held him a prisoner, made me think of a bald-headed eagle I'd seen years before, an old eagle with a broken wing, caged away from the skies he could only watch with an embittered eye. The air was gray with the smoke and ash from Kiooka, very much as I've seen more southerly hills gray with the smoke of distant forest-fires. This grayness gave

a touch of unreality to the things about us. Even the sun had taken on a more somber tinge of copper, just as the modified light that filtered down from it seemed to carry some wordless menace, like the unrest that fills the world during a solar eclipse.

"It seems foolish to say there's no way out of this," he contended as his narrowed eye still again traversed the rugged amphitheater of peaks. "It's God's open country, after all, and no valley with a frontier-line as long as this can be absolutely impregnable. There *must* be some way through!"

"Then why has it never been found?" I asked.

"Because these people have never *wanted* to find it," was his reply. "They've been happy here. And the more restless spirits have been held down by the old tribal taboos. They'd kill us, I suppose, if they caught us trying to get away."

"Then you intend to get away?" I ventured. Pareso, of late, had not taken me any too closely into his confidence.

"When I find a pass through those peaks," as-

serted my companion, with the old restless look once more in his eyes.

"And how about Thera?" I asked. And his eye, for the first time, met mine.

"She must be taken with us," was the slightly delayed answer. "But in that, of course, there will always be a double danger."

I stood silent a moment. I tried to picture that queenly figure, clad in a capote and moccasins of goatskin, battling through wintry passes and scaling rocky parapets and fighting a perilous way over icy moraines.

"How about Knutsson?" I inquired with a carelessness that was more paraded than real. And at that name, I noticed, Pareso's gaunt face hardened again.

"You know what's happening there?" he demanded.

"I know," I acknowledged.

"I tried to stop that," explained the man at my side. "I saw it coming. And I did my best to keep Knutsson away. I took him out with me, day after

day, and did what I could to keep him busy at other things. But it did no good."

"Apparently not," I acknowledged.

"I know Knutsson," averred the frowning Pareso. "He's merely an animal. And he probably wouldn't give us a second thought, if it came to a pinch. So our problem, next to keeping our skins whole, is to save him from himself. We've got to go through with this. And we've no time to lose."

I had the feeling that Pareso was not telling me everything that lay in his mind. Reticence, I remembered, was one of his strong points. And he had the trick of acting a move or two ahead of the game. Yet whatever his secret motives, we were all in the same boat, and surrounded by the same dangers.

"But why the need for hurry?" I queried as our leader, deep in thought, paced back and forth in front of the outlandish Arctic temple with its grotesquely carved beam-ends.

"Haven't you seen what's taking place?" chal-

lenged Pareso as he came to a stop in front of me.

"I've seen a number of things," I acknowledged, "and there are other things I've merely suspected."

"Well, there's clearly a split in the ranks here," explained our leader. "You may have noticed, in the matter of this temple-worship, that it's mostly the women and children and the old men who continue to go through with the services and keep to their promise of leaving tribute. The younger braves, the fighting men, seem to have seceded from the old faith. We've shaken the dust off their old gods and they've started to question their tribal taboos. To make things worse, this Pennekuk seems to be feeding them on enough hate-talk to keep their unrest alive. And now they're even making capital out of this volcano eruption."

I remembered, at the moment, what Ota had said about the old story of the Haunted Pass.

"Then why can't we take our turn at capitalizing this Kiooka eruption?" I asked. "Since they

blame us for the outbreak, it's naturally our duty to appease these gods who are kicking up all the disturbance. To propitiate those gods we'd have to take their Sookinook, and also Knutsson, the Fire-God, and the whole temple outfit, for that matter, up to Kiooka. We could take 'em up there for the rites expected of us. That gives us a good reason for a dignified retreat into the higher regions of the Bad Lands, where we could push farther on and find a pass through the mountains."

"There is no pass," proclaimed the morose-eyed Pareso.

"There is," I contended.

"And who would find it for us?"

"I will," I proclaimed. And having told him of my talk with the herd-girl, I proposed that Ota and I should equip ourselves for two or three days in the upper hills and make our reconnaissance.

But it was only grudgingly that Pareso at last swung in with my proposal.

"I don't see why women should have to figure in all our plans," he none too graciously observed.

"Women," I retorted, "*always* figure in the plans of men!"

And I spoke more truly, I was to discover, than I had at the moment reason to believe.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE PATH ALONG THE SKY

OTA's search for information as to passes over those encircling mountains could not be called eminently successful. She unearthed rumors, it is true, just as she gleaned echoes of the old traditions and fragments of old beliefs. But one contradicted the other, and hope did not burn in my heart until the girl smuggled in to me the toothless old grandmother of Olaka, who, for a handful of our highly colored trade-candy, mumbled a long and inconsequential story about her father's father. This brave, according to her tale, had been a very great hunter of the *nanook*—the bear—before those animals had disappeared from the surrounding hills. He would even defy the angry gods and climb three and four "sleeps" into the mountains,

and the year before his death, after crawling home with frozen hands and feet, he told of piercing those mountains and meeting up with a dark-faced stranger who gave him a knife of *aviuk*—ivory—and pointed out to him in which direction lay the *Culelulewak-Noona,* which meant the Land of the White Whale. And the old hag stuck to her story, stating that she herself as a child had slept on a bearskin which her grandfather had carried back into the valley. When I inquired as to the color of that skin, knowing well enough that the white-furred polar bear would be utterly out of question in such a region, she replied that the skin was not white, but dark and long-haired and of great size. And that gave me something to think about.

"Ask her," I commanded Ota, who was interpreting for me, "if she knows in which hills these *nanook* were once found, if she has any idea of the direction her grandfather took when he went on his mountain hunts."

I watched the rheumy old eyes as they blinked in the corrugated face while Ota was putting these

questions to her. And the answer was worth remembering. For as a child, the old woman protested, her mother had often warned her that if she went too far from the topick, if she went too far up in the Bad Lands where the Oil Lake stood, she would be eaten alive by a prowling *nanook*. So that region, plainly, was the place where the mountain-bears roamed. And beyond that region, it was equally obvious, the old-time hunter would have penetrated to meet the darker-skinned stranger with the *aviuk* knife.

It was not much to go on; yet it was all we had. The more I thought it over, however, the more I was persuaded there might be some inkling of truth in the old dame's maunderings. And when Ota and I quietly made ready and as quietly stole away through the sleeping village, we headed toward the Lake of Oil and the Bad Lands that were a taboo to her tribe.

"Are you afraid?" I asked the slender-bodied but sinewy girl at my side as we climbed steadily above the valley fog and reached the higher slopes

where the grass-lands ended and even the stunted timber grew sparser in growth.

"With you, O Fire-Stone, I am never afraid," was the quiet-toned answer that came back to me.

"And if we found a path over the mountains?" I suggested as we trudged on.

"Am I not to be always with you?" asked the girl.

"But if we fought our way through to the outer world, the world of my people who are not like your people, would you be unhappy then for the home you would never know again?"

"To that," answered Ota as her hand sought and clasped mine in the half-light, "I have already given answer."

I should have been happier over that speech, I know, than I actually was. For it's not often in this world that man is rewarded with more loyalties than he deserves—unless, of course, he is a master and lover of dogs. But Ota, I remembered, was something more than a retriever at my heels. She was a human being, a budding woman with all

a woman's capacity for joy and sorrow. And I, in more ways than one, was responsible for her, for her life, for her safety to-day and her happiness to-morrow. She still thought me a sort of human miracle, as wonderful, almost, as Pareso's binoculars, which I had brought along with us, the binoculars which could make a jack-pine jump up close to you and a mountain-peak suddenly bend down to your side. I was a hero to her, and as such I had a rôle to sustain.

Yet as we went on, mounting always to higher and higher levels, there was an appeasing sense of comradeship in having Ota there at my side. It may have disconcerted me a little, of course, when I glanced at her in the clearing light and beheld her *kooletah* fantastically decorated with the entrails of the broken nickel watch which I had given her. But under her shoulder-pack that held a rawhide scaling-ladder and a sleeping-robe and a seven-day supply of native pemmican, she stood as straight as a willow-wand and went on as untiring as an athlete. No complaint came from her, even

when my own broad shoulders were galled by the second pack that made up the rest of our equipment. And she was good to look at, I had to acknowledge in the clearing morning light as we skirted the malodorous Lake of Oil and sought a trail through the rockier buttes beyond it. There was grace in every movement as she clambered as agile as a deer up the broken granite slopes or mounted a pinnacle to study out a passageway through the promontories and walls that opposed us. But I could not help thinking of an ampler and fairer and queenlier figure in the wide valley which we had left behind us, a figure that seemed imperial in its unstudied grace, absolute in its mysterious and immemorial beauty. And I was young enough and foolish enough to resent the thought that I could have only the hand-maiden while the queen remained with another. For youth, in its blindness, has little patience with the second-best. Only when it is too late can we learn how relative are all our classifications and how unstable are all such earthly arrangements.

"You are thinking of Thera," said Ota as we stopped to rest and eat, well above the timber-line.

"Why do you say that?" I asked, looking back into the misty valley that was a diminished bowl of green stippled with the silver threads of its waterways.

"Men's eyes are always sad when they think of Thera," was the unexpected reply from the girl beside me.

"She is not for me," I retorted, almost curtly.

"She is not for any man," announced Ota as she took her turn at staring back into the valley. And, while I wondered if this could indeed be true, I fell to remembering how great beauty seemed to bring only great sorrow in its wake, how Helen of Troy had brought only disaster to her country and distress to her home, how Laura of Padua was the unwitting source of much suffering, and Elaine of Astolat and Deirdre of Erin and our own Mary Queen of Scots found no lasting joy in a world where their beauty flamed like a fire and went out in a gust of tears.

Of these things I thought as I sat on a limestone ridge beside a sheep-girl who sewed watch-wheels on her *kooletah* and chewed a pemmican of pounded meal and goat-meat between her square white teeth and licked the grease from her fingers with the same lips that I had kissed in the tree-muffled moonlight.

Yet those lips were coral-red with youth and there was womanly loveliness in the line of the rounded neck that melted into the milky-skinned shoulders where the rough *kooletah* stood open at the throat. And there was softness and tenderness in the blue eyes, so indistinguishably oblique, that studied me from under a childishly frowning brow. And a wayward impulse, born of loneliness and desperation, went slowly through my body and prompted me to reach for the hand that lay so close to my own.

I took possession of that unresisting hand, and held it for a moment, and felt a chill strike into my bones as a wind from the snow-covered slopes bore down on me. And the smoke of Kiooka, ris-

ing thinly over my shoulder, reminded me of other things.

"We must be getting on," I said as I rose to my feet.

Ota, without further question or hesitation, followed me in making ready for the trail again. One of the most disarming things about her, in fact, was her continuous quiet passivity, her unvarying acquiescence to each wayward mood and movement of my own. And allegiance like that, I felt, imposed a pretty solemn duty on a man.

But I soon had other things to take up my thoughts. For as we climbed higher and higher along that rugged rampart of peaks the choosing of a trail became more and more a matter of study and foresight. Sometimes, indeed, finding ourselves in a defile that had no outlet, we were compelled to retrace our steps and realign the landmarks that would be needed for our final descent into the valley. Sometimes we had broken rock walls to ascend and fissures to crowd through and narrow ledges to traverse When we came to a

glacial-green stream, as cold as death, I carried Ota across the shallow torrent, carried her on my shoulder with a consolatory sense of warmth from her clinging body. But ledge by ledge and scissure by scissure we kept ascending. And before our first day was over we had floundered through a snow-field and crept across a sloping moraine of ice.

We were so well up in the clouds that the cold began to bother us and I had some difficulty in finding a camping-spot sufficiently protected from the wind that swept through those towering peaks. Eventually, however, I stumbled on a bowl-like shelf of schist that faced back over the valley and was comparatively free of snow. We had no wood for a fire, of course, but here we ate our frugal supper and unrolled our sleeping-robes and made ready for rest.

That night, I remember, there was an exceptionally brilliant display of Northern Lights, so vivid in color that they gave a touch of unreality to everything about us and kept me from sleeping.

Streams of color swung and swayed above my head, rustling there like titanic curtains whose lower fringes seemed almost within touch of the hand. They were every color, orange, apple-green, opal and lavender, rose and yellow, but with the green always preponderant, so that the light they cast over the timeless peaks and slopes about me was greener than the light filtered through a thousand leaves, greener than sea-water. But as time went on the undulations of these streamers became less frantic. They died down like sea-waves, and with the dying down of the movement the intensity of their color also decreased. That pageantry of tone and tint seemed to be passing away, as a summer thunder-storm passes away, only to swing back again with redoubled vigor, once more drenching the world with whirlpools and swirls and wheels and eddies of dancing color. And as I lay there watching the last flutter of the inverted apple-green flames and wondering if the silken rustling that seemed to fill the air was a real sound or the product of an over-tired mind, I was

startled by the touch of a small hand on my shoulder.

When I looked about I saw that it was Ota, the Ota whom an hour before I had rolled closely up in her sleeping-robe and left nested in a little rock-hollow of her own, a good twelve feet away.

"I am cold," she whispered as she stooped over me. And when I sat up, perplexed, her arms crept in about my shoulders.

"I can give you my coat," I said as I stared into her face.

And she looked oddly forlorn and small in the spectral green light that still surrounded us.

"It is not that," she said, shaking her head. "My spirit is very lonely, O Fire-Stone!"

"Then shall we talk?" I suggested.

And still again she shook her head.

"I do not like you so far away," she said with that inflammatory candor of hers.

I no longer looked into her eyes. Instead, I stared down into the valley that lay so misty and remote beneath us, the valley that already seemed

a world away. But moving through that midnight mist I thought I discerned a moving light, a faint and far-off light that signified vigilance and alertness and reminded me that one is never so alone on this earth as he may have imagined. So I took the shivering Ota and rewrapped her in her sleeping-robe, binding it close about her with the rawhide strands of my scaling-ladder. Then, wrapped in my own robe, I found a position close beside her, with her face resting in the hollow of my shoulder and her hand clasped in mine under the edge of the ragged fur robe.

She was so close to me that I could hear her sigh, that the warmth of our two huddled bodies intermingled, that the rime of her breath mixed with the rime of my own. But we slept long and deep that night and I was able to face the appraising light of morning with no regret drifting in on my heart, even as a small windrow of snowflakes had drifted in on our bodies.

But there were other difficulties to beset us. For before two hours of travel that morning we found

ourselves, to all appearances, at the end of our trail, carefully as that trail had been chosen.

I could discern no possible path of advance. Much as I hated to turn back defeated, I saw before us only impassable slopes of snow and impregnable walls of rock. The danger of getting hopelessly lost in that skyey wilderness increased with every mile we left behind us. And the more imminent danger of tumbling over a snow-lip into a crevasse increased with every foot we mounted.

But even to mount farther now seemed an impossibility. So I sat down to digest my defeat, to school my mind to the thought of turning back.

Out of that mood of lassitude, however, I was wakened by a small cry from Ota, whom, for the moment, I had forgotten. The slender-bodied sheep-girl was standing on a small point of rock above me, pointing upward. I could not at first make out either the object of her gaze or the cause of her excitement. But high above the crags and defiles that lay between us I finally discerned a mountain-goat. Even as I looked I could see the

solitary small animal turn and go higher up the ramparting white slope and disappear between two shoulders of darker rock.

"That means there is a way out," cried Ota. "For he could not live on rock and snow. There must be some path down to where his food is."

I knew little about such animals. But I could see well enough that there was nothing to support life in the terrain about us.

"That leads to the pass," repeated Ota, with her eyes fixed on the small *V* between the shoulders against the pallid blue sky.

"But I'm not a goat," I objected, disheartened by the roughness of the territory that lay between us and the shoulder-vent toward which the girl was staring.

"Can you go where I go?" was Ota's question as she clambered down to my side.

"I can!" I proclaimed, a little nettled by that challenge from a figure so diminutive and yet so determined.

"Then we must find the pass!"

What we went through, during the next few hours, would be no easy thing to describe. Nor do all the details of it remain clear in my mind. How we used the scaling ladder and hauled each other up bald rock-faces; how we floundered through snow-fields and crept, tied together, over perilous slopes of glacial-ice that fell off into emptiness; how we crawled up fissures and clefts and steadied each other along narrow ledges that overlooked infinitude; how we lowered ourselves into pockets and waited huddled together until snow-flurries beat out their fury and went on again, with our eyes always on the two grim shoulders against the pallid blue sky—all this is no longer a matter of remembrance.

But in the end we reached a narrow defile through which the wind ramped and snow blew in intermittent gusts. And we saw that we were no longer ascending. As we beat our way forward, in fact, the clouds parted and the weather cleared and at the end of that narrow pass we looked down on another world.

It may not have been a world especially beautiful to the eye, for all I could see was a series of diminishing foot-hills overhung by snow-clouds, with somber splotches of darker valley-land between them, and beyond that again snow-fields and coulées and hog-backs that melted into a long and lonely line of tundra extending on the right as far as the eye could see. But it meant delivery, a possible escape from prison, the promise of a road back to the world that had been taken away from us. And as I stood on that windy threshold, staring at those desolate enough slopes, very much as Cortez must once have stared down at the Pacific, absurd waves of happiness swept through my tired body and drove the coldness out of my blood.

"There's a way out," I said aloud.

And Ota pressed closer to catch the words that had fallen from my lips.

"Where would it take us?" asked the girl at my side, staring with clouded eyes at the receding tiers of hills that to her meant only the Unknown.

"It must lead down to tide-water," I answered.

But I knew by her face that she did not understand me.

"It is a very big and cold country," she said.

"But it leads back to my own people," I explained to her, plainly bewildering her by my lightness of heart. I even felt a sudden impatience to be on my way along those downward slopes. I nursed an impulse to toss everything to the winds and step over that threshold while it was still open to us.

But the thought of Thera rose mistily in my mind. And there was Pareso to remember, as well as Knutsson. And my heart would never be at peace, I knew, if I betrayed those comrades in peril, if I thought only of my own escape and happiness.

"We must go back," I said as I turned away from that lonely yet alluring vista. And half an hour later we were struggling through snow, knee-deep, fighting our way back to the imprisoning valley that was no longer a prison.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE WOMAN DESIRED

It was at the transept end of the Temple of the Concourse that I found Thera, stooping over a spinning-wheel Knutsson had patiently carpentered together for her use. Her sandaled foot rested on the rocking treadle and the massed gold of her hair was luminous in the side-light that fell across her loosely-gowned shoulders. And her eyes, as she spun the rough native wool into threads, were remote and ruminative. There was something so elemental, so timeless, in that picture of her as she stooped over her purring wheel, that it made me think of a page of Homer come to life. She seemed as remote as a figure on an Athenian frieze. I could have stooped and clasped her knees, as that happier blond-haired giant had clasped them in the

leaf-filtered moonlight. But she seemed as inaccessible, in my newer mood, as a mountain-peak clothed in snow.

"You have been away," she quietly observed as she looked up. "I missed you."

"I have been up in the mountains that lie beyond the Temple of the Summit," I acknowledged.

"And why did you face danger like that?" she asked, as she turned to arrange the wool on her distaff.

"To see if there was a gateway to the outer world," was my answer. "And I have found one."

The brooding azure eyes slowly turned and gazed into mine.

"Then you are greater than Karl Knutsson," she finally observed.

"Only in mastering mountain-trails," was my slightly embittered response.

"But he failed, where you succeeded."

I faced her loveliness without flinching.

"And *I* failed, where *he* succeeded," I reminded her.

She looked at me, long and silently, arrested by the unhappiness in my eyes.

"But I love you, David," she cried with a deeper color in her cheek. "I love you for what you are and what you've done. And I want you to love me!"

Having said that, she did an unexpected thing. She stood up before me and held out her arms to me. She moved toward me, almost wistfully. And I, who had tried to tell myself that I had nothing in common with her, that our destinies lay implacably apart, felt the old power and the old madness sing through my blood. I discovered, with my arms about her regal body, how unexpectedly warm and soft and desirable that body could be.

When her arms were withdrawn, oddly enough, she reached to my belt for my knife and with it cut off a single tress of her hair and thrust it into my hand.

"Keep that—always!" she whispered.

I scarcely knew what it meant, at the time, but my steps were none too steady as I turned away.

And when I found Pareso, half an hour later, he attributed my excitement to the news I had carried back to him.

"We'll get out of this hell-hole," he coolly proclaimed. "I've already told Attapok and his Fish-Eaters we're to take their Sookinook back to her upper temple, for the appeasement of Kiooka. And we'll make that ceremony our exit-speech."

So our preparations for departure began. Our equipment, Pareso explained, should be as complete yet as compact as possible. Each one of us should carry as much food as could be taken without exciting undue suspicion, and for each, too, there must be a blanket or sleeping-robe, for the open nights on the outland trail would be cold. Twelve especially selected braves, he further explained, had already been picked out to carry Sookinook's ceremonial gold, which had already been solemnly packed and sewn in sheepskin bags. The depleted duffel-bag, which Pareso still kept under lock and key, would be taken care of by that chief himself, after a distribution of numerous

trinkets at the final tribal rites. Then the tribal goddess, accompanied by her handmaiden, Ota, and guarded by twenty headmen, would be carried in her draped throne-chair to the lower approaches of the mountain temple, where at nightfall the burning of our last fragments of Greek-fire would proclaim her propitious entrance into her former abode.

I was not unconscious, from that hour forward, of a new note of excitement running through our temple group. The one person who seemed to remain outwardly unmoved was Knutsson. That giant, after fitting an ominously long shaft to an ominously heavy spear-head, busied himself in the fashioning of a crescent-bladed battle ax which he lashed to a curved haft with thongs of rawhide. He toiled silently and sullenly over this strangely medieval weapon so suggestive of Berserker days. He showed, oddly enough, no great joy over the discovery of the pass that had so electrified the rest of us into action, though I wrote down his smoldering resentment, at the time, to the fact that another

had succeeded where he himself had so manifestly failed.

But peril, I found, was clustering more closely about Knutsson and his companions than any of us imagined. Pareso, indeed, may have sensed this, for one of his first moves was to assemble his twelve dubious tribesmen, load them down with his precious goatskin bags and, with his revolver in his hand, convoy them quietly out past the thinning fringe of the topick settlement. Their exact destination, once they were in the hills, he kept strictly to himself. But I found it hard to fight down the impression that there was a strain of folly running through any such stubbornly venal side-movement. For at that particular juncture, I felt, there were more important things than a few dozen bags of yellow metal, though Pareso merely laughed and remarked that a hammer of gold has broken open many a gate of iron.

On the same night, under cover of darkness, our chief dispatched Ota and me to a point in the lower hills, where we cached two emergency packs

of dried goat-meat. We had started back, consolingly close in the midnight darkness, when the girl caught at my arm.

"What is it?" I asked as I turned to follow the line of her gaze. But I needed no answer to that question. For as I looked I saw a mounting flare of fire, high in the hills to the northwest of where we stood.

"It's the Temple of Sookinook," murmured the girl, a touch of awe in her voice. "They are burning Sookinook's temple."

I knew it was true. And a second faint chill crept into my blood as I watched the flames mount higher and a ruddy collapse of roof-timbers told me that our upland house of mystery with its carved gold and its shattered sarcophagus of glacial ice was already a thing of the past.

"We must hurry!" I cried as we turned and headed back toward our companions.

It was Pareso himself who intercepted me at the edge of the concourse.

"You see what they've done to us!" was his quietly embittered cry.

He turned, as he spoke, and stared at the dying glow that winked like an evil eye from the rim of the hills.

"They've burned the upper temple," I acknowledged.

"They've done more than that," averred Pareso. "They've stolen two hundred spears and have just tried to burn us out here by planting a cresset of fire against our temple-timbers. I gave them a Roman-candle against their buttocks, and they must have thought it was the Devil himself on their heels for they went off like frightened rabbits. But we've got to get up in those hills before they know what we're headed for. Perhaps you haven't noticed how carefully all the women and children have been taken down to the lower encampment. And the only thing that means now is warfare."

We were inside the barbarically carved building by this time, where, I noticed, our packs were already piled together.

"Get Thera and Knutsson," commanded Pareso. "Those regal Nordics can finish their sleep when we've climbed into a quieter neighborhood."

My spirits were heavy as I put what remained of my goods together and pondered on what the next few days, on what even the next few hours, might hold in store for us. A sense of unreality fell about me and everything around me, a feeling of instability like that which overtakes one when an earthquake shakes man's tenuous faith in *terra firma*. And that feeling was not diminished when I went to the temple door, and, looking out, perceived that Kiooka was once more in eruption and pouring a muffling cloud of smoke and ash across the opal-green sky.

But even that was forgotten, the next moment, when I turned and stared into the startled face of Ota.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"They have gone!" she said in a voice touched with awe.

"They have gone?" I repeated, rather vacuously. It took a moment or two, apparently, for the full meaning of her words to filter through to my brain. "Who says they've gone?"

But I did not wait for an answer. With an absurdly sinking heart I ran toward the skin-hung sleeping chamber, toward the humble rough couch that labor and loving care had struggled to make queenly, toward the canopied mattress of ptarmigan-feathers covered with plaited rabbit-skin where night by night a queenly visitor had rested in queenly sleep. And I found it empty, just as two minutes later I found the disordered wall-bunk of Knutsson empty.

Not only were they gone, but gone as well were their meager possessions, the long-handled spear and the moon-shaped battle-ax, the *kooletah* bordered with gold, the plaited fur sleeping-robe, the steel hunting-knife, even the precious pocket-compass I had so carefully brought back from the hills.

I sat down, sick at heart, consumed with a feeling of betrayal, of desertion. I said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

Not so Pareso, however, who followed Ota into the little sleeping chamber. He stood, for a moment, staring down at the empty bed still redolent

of that superb body which had rested in it. Then his hands clenched and unclenched, spasms of rage went through his gaunt frame, and he fell to cursing in a language that was strange to me.

"She would leave us!" he gasped. "And with that bullock! With that animal without the brains of a rabbit! Ha, but he will pay for this, fool that he is! Before the week is out he will come crawling back on broken feet, cringing to us to take him in! And without me, me, she will see how helpless she is. She will crawl back and ask to be taken care of, to be saved from a death even worse than her earlier one! Ha, so this is how she treats me? I gave her life, and this is my reward! I forgot that she was a woman, and trusted her!"

I couldn't have paid much attention to him as he raved on, for my thoughts, at the moment, were on Thera. I pictured her as daring the unknown pass, as battling through wind and snow to that sterile outer world, contending with hunger and fatigue, staggering on until she came to some friendly igloo where she would be taken in by a

small and slant-eyed people who would feed her walrus-meat and wonder at her strange tongue. I tried to picture her as sleeping on a willow mat, between deerskins, under an arching roof of ice-blocks dewed with sweat from a seal-oil lamp, lying there swallowed up in some lonely Arctic waste.

"She belongs to me!" I heard Pareso crying out in a voice thick with rage. "I brought her back, and she is mine. I breathed the breath of life into her body and . . ."

"But where is she?" I interrupted, tired of all that loose talk.

"To-night," cried Pareso, "she is with her rabbit-brained giant. She is having her hour. But to-morrow, mark you, she will be coming to us for help."

I don't know what prompted me to defend the woman who had indeed deserted him. But I turned on Pareso with a flash of anger that seemed beyond my control.

"I don't see that you gave her so much," I contended.

"I gave her life," he shouted back. "She belonged to me!"

"And what would you have done with her?" I mocked, conscious of the renewed rumblings of Kiooka that were taking place beyond the outlandish walls that still enclosed us.

"I had my own ends for her," maintained Pareso.

"Well, she seems to have had an end or two for herself," I said as Ota placed a corded knapsack at my feet.

Then I crossed to the door, where I stood studying the heavens, perplexed by the mist that had blotted out the stars and thrown such an unearthly light on everything about us.

"We must go by the back way," Ota was whispering through that uncannily decreasing light.

I thought, as Pareso joined us and we started out, that there would be some expression of regret from Ota, some sign of heart-heaviness at leaving what had been her one and only home. But she trudged on in front of me, picking her way as she

went. She uttered no single word of complaint as we circled through the deserted topicks and crossed the empty valley bottom and began to climb to the rougher ground that marked the approach to the Forbidden Hills. We could feel the ascent, by this time, for our packs were heavy. But we kept resolutely on until Ota stopped us with a gesture.

"Wait," she said as she crept forward and vanished in the foggy air. And we waited, ready enough to depend on her acuter animal-like keenness of scent and hearing.

"We must not go this way," she warned us on her return. "There is a trap, and many men hidden behind rocks. They are men with arrows. We must go back and climb up by way of the Black Oil Lake."

So back we went.

"We can thank God for this ash-fog," averred Pareso as we resumed our climb. "I suppose it will stay with us?"

"That is because of Kiooka," explained the girl. "It is the fire and smoke from his angry heart."

"Could we make the pass, in weather like this?" I abruptly asked Ota as she hesitated over one of two trails between the glacial baldheads about us.

"It would not be easy," she admitted. "But the wind is rising," she announced as she moistened a forefinger and held it above her head. And she was not mistaken, for five minutes later I could feel the colder breath of that mountain wind on my forehead wet with sweat. It seemed to sweep cleaner air along the broken hillsides, for the sting in my nose and throat became less acute and the twilight that surrounded us became more ragged and thin, like a harbor-mist hit by a land-breeze.

"If it clears," proclaimed Pareso as we stopped once more to get our breath, "we'll have to slip under cover for the rest of the day. For as I remember this terrain, we could still be seen from the valley. And another night's climb should take us for ever out of their reach."

"But there's still Thera," I reminded him.

"She'll come back to us," he said with a conviction which, at the moment, didn't seem based on reason. "It's not Knutsson she wants. It's life."

I was still thinking over this when, half an hour later, the clearing air drove us under cover behind a shielding rampart of rock. We could now see Kiooka belching a plume of smoke that pennoned off southward in the wind. Below us, on our left, lay the black surface of the Lake of Oil, taking on sinister ebon glints as its surface reflected the pallid light. It impressed me as ugly and futile and meaningless, a malodorous monument to the folly and superstition of a tribe long given over to crooked thinking. But Pareso, I noticed, studied it with a less disdainful eye.

"For that, too, I shall some day come back," he proclaimed as he stood surveying the curving dike that held back their eternally wasting reservoir of energy. But I was too tired to give much thought to his words. I could feel weariness surge through my body, deadening wave by wave, leaving in its wake an indifference that made me drowsily reckless as to the present and disdainful as to the future. I merely saw that Ota was on watch behind our little rock rampart and that the natural hollow in the stone beside me called as invitingly as a bed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CASCADE OF FIRE

I WAS awakened by the sound of a pistol-shot uncomfortably close to my ear. When I looked up I saw Pareso leaning against a rock and staring through a small cloud of smoke into the valley beneath him.

"Did I get him?" he was demanding of Ota. And the girl, I noticed, shook her head in negation.

"That means we'll soon have the whole tribe up here," said Pareso as he dropped back under cover.

"That is Komok the Runner," explained the girl, peering over the stone-ridge. "He hurries to join his people who are hidden in the birch grove far below. There are many hundred of them."

Pareso was inspecting the terrain both below and above us.

"They'll have us pretty well hemmed in here?" he half asked of the still watching Ota.

"We must go lower again," explained the girl, "and circle back nearer the trail that once led to the Temple of Sookinook. By that road only can we reach the pass."

Pareso sat thinking this over.

"What they need, then, is a little discouragement in their hill-climbing," he observed as he stooped over his duffel-bag. "And I'm going to give it to them."

"But they will wait until night comes," prompted the girl leaning on the parapet of stone.

"Then I'll be ready for them," proclaimed Pareso as he rose to his feet. His face, I noticed, was unnaturally grim.

"What are you going to do?" I asked as he started down the broken hillside.

"Wait and see," was his none too satisfactory answer. But I could see, as I watched, that he was advancing in the direction of the oil-lake dike. I could also see, lower in the valley, a series of

smoke-signals go from point to point. Twice, also, Ota and I heard the far-off drumming of a keelon.

But Pareso remained away much longer than I had expected. The light thinned and the prolonged northern twilight set in and still again we heard the muffled throb of keelons.

"They are coming," announced Ota, staring down through the spectral air. "See, they come!"

I had some difficulty in seeing them, at first, for nothing was distinct in the falling darkness. But, once I had made sure of that living mass of spearmen advancing so guardedly and yet so steadily up the wide hollow between us, I felt that practically the entire tribe was there in the field. It seemed like an army. And my blood chilled as I watched its silent yet purposeful ascent.

"What in God's name is keeping Pareso?" I cried out as that blurred mass advanced so malevolently and so steadily up the long slope.

The answer to that question did not come from Ota, who stood so close at my side. It came, instead, from the shadows below the lake-dike, where

the silence was ruptured by a sudden thunder of sound and the darkness was rent by a rose of flame that flowered for a second and went out again.

It went out again, but even as I looked and listened and understood that Pareso must have blown up the lake-dike with what remained of his high explosive, I realized that the same blast that had shattered the embankment had also set fire to the escaping oil. For as I stared down through the darkness I could see a sudden serpent of ruby widen out into a rivulet of crimson and expand again miraculously into an opening fan of smoke-crowned flame. It seemed to gather speed as it went, so that the roar of its flight filled the air and its ever-advancing first wave appeared to be an army of dancing red devils, red devils who leaped over rocks and pirouetted into hollows and snapped up every growing thing as they went. And loud as its roar was I could catch the sudden note of a higher-pitched sound, the sound from a hundred throats as that river of fire swept down on the startled army of Attapok.

How many it caught between the higher shoulders of that widening lateral valley I could not say. But it came down on them like a breath out of hell, leaving them little time for escape, crisping them as a forest-fire crisps oak-leaves, tossing them in a blackening heap as lightly as a mountain-torrent tosses quartz-sand into a bar. A great pillar of smoke boiled up in the air, rolling out lateral billows as it rose, shifting and changing like thunder-clouds before the outbreak of a storm.

This, in one way, interfered with my vision of a scene that was innately horrible, even while it added to its final texture of horror. But as that hungry tide swept forward I could see that a still expanding river of destruction was carrying everything with it, was leaving nothing behind it. Its movement seemed more leisured, it is true, by the time it reached the valley bottom. There was even a venomous sort of deliberation in the way in which it advanced on the hundreds of empty topicks and circled menacingly about the glittering Temple of the Concourse. I could see the smaller structures

go up like chaff, carried away in a coiling tumult of flame. But the temple itself, refusing to be swept off its feet, seemed fighting for its life, seemed to be defying its oppressors, like a buffalo-bull fighting off a pack of wolves. But it could not last for long. Even as I looked I could see the far-off flames licking up the shadowy side-walls, mounting to the roof, meeting in an evil arch of triumph. Then a higher torch of flame flowered in the graying air, burned itself out, and collapsed with a final burst of smoke shot through with geysers of sparks. And the wolves of red, seeing that their work in that quarter was well done, prowled on to the remoter lowlands, where they slunk about devouring each and every trace of life that lay in their path.

I knew, as I watched, that something more than an army had been destroyed and a city of topicks wiped out. I knew that the home of Ota and of Attapok was no more; that the aged Koomiak would sing no more in that valley; and that the keelons and tom-toms of spearmen would no longer

sound between the hills. I knew that slant-eyed women would no longer card wool under those pallid skies; that brawny youths would no longer dig yellow metal from those sullen northern mountains; that white-skinned girls would bathe no more in those limpid northern lakes that bubbled warm from the volcanic rocks where they lay cupped; that a strangely isolated people had been burned out of their last aerie as completely as a colony of tent-caterpillars might have been burned out of a treetop.

It was half an hour later that our chief came toiling up the hillside with his pack-bag over his shoulder and a dozen yellow spear-heads, broken from their shafts, dangling at his side.

He said little, but there was a glitter in his eye not altogether to my liking.

"What are we to do?" I demanded.

"*Jamais arrière!*" he cried as he pointed toward the mountain-peaks that towered above us. "There's nothing to hold us here."

"How about Thera?" I reminded him as we

took up our way again, with Ota leading as we went.

"Ah, no trace of them?" he soliloquized aloud. Then he laughed one of his unpalatably mirthless laughs. "But she will come back to us, you'll find," he concluded.

I made no answer to that statement, for Ota had stopped before a fissure-edge that suddenly confronted her, reminding us that we must bear to the right if we were eventually to work upward toward the pass.

"But that will not take us to the Temple of Sookinook," objected Pareso, staring frowningly through the uncertain light.

"That temple is burned," Ota reminded him.

"But my gold is there," persisted Pareso. "It's there, cached on a rock-ledge behind the temple site."

"Gold," I contended, "won't feed us on the way out." And I felt a sudden new sense of remoteness from this man at my side.

"But I must take out enough to make them be-

lieve," he maintained. "I can't go without my gold!"

It seemed childish, all things considered, even worse than childish. But he refused to listen to reason. He wanted his gold, and he intended to get it. And if I declined to make that detour back to the Temple of the Summit he would go by himself and carry out what he was able to.

"Then we'll wait for you on the upper trail," I finally conceded. "This fissure widens to a canyon and later on becomes a crevasse. But to get past the glacier-wall where it ends, you've got to be on this side of the lead."

"Don't worry about me," retorted Pareso. "I've climbed mountains, my lad, before you were born."

"But you'll climb none after you're dead," I was exasperated enough to retort as he made ready for his detour.

He swung about, at that taunt from me, and faced me with some semblance of his old fire. He drew himself up to his full height, leveling one long finger at my face.

"Wait for me!" he said in a voice of thunder.

But I was too weary and heartsick to be much impressed by his histrionics. Between us seemed to yawn an abyss as tangible as the fissure that lay within a dozen paces of where we stood. I even nursed the wayward impression that from that hour forward we belonged to different worlds. So it was Ota, and not I, who answered him.

"We will wait," said the girl at my side.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE BATTLE IN THE CLOUDS

THE human brain, I've found, can register just so many impressions. There is a limit to the mind's power of absorption just as there is a limit to the stomach's grosser power of digestion. And event was so crowded on event during that last frantic flight of ours that I had no clear-cut knowledge of when and how we ate, of when and where we fell asleep, and of when night merged so imperceptibly into day and day again paled into its modified northern darkness.

But it must have been early morning when I wakened again, with Ota's sleeping body close to my own and with the rime of her breath showing white along the dark edges of her parka. An odd sense of security even crept through me as I glanced

about our sleeping-place and realized how cunningly had been chosen that skyey bivouac for the night, a hollowed-out ledge on the face of the broken cliff that towered above us, commanding a view of the canyons and laterals and valleys far below.

I was glad enough to be above and beyond them, and my sense of security was slowly ripening into one of gratitude at some final escape when I was disturbed by a small and trivial thing much nearer at hand. Everything about us was silent; and everything in the lower levels was without stir or movement. But just beyond the rock-lip over which I was gazing I perceived a second intermittent small cloud of mist between me and the open light.

Then slowly, above the lip of the rock, I saw a human hand lift itself and grope for a hold on the weathered ridge of stone. It was a strong hand and a sinewy one. And its movements seemed malignant, like those of a serpent, as it so silently shifted and explored from side to side.

I could see nothing of the body beneath it, but I knew it was the hand of an enemy. I knew, as I waited and watched, that it implied peril for Ota and me. So my jaw tightened as I reached for the belt ax that lay at my side. I don't think I even breathed as I brought that ax-head down, with all my force, on the corded fingers clinging to the rock-lip.

There was one cry, strangely high-pitched, as the shattered hand fell away. I had a brief vision, as I stared over the parapet, of a body tumbling and rolling down a precipitous incline.

"That was Pennekuk," said Ota, suddenly wide awake at my side. But before I could give much thought to that information the valley quietness was broken by a number of pistol-shots. I thought, for a moment, that these were signal-shots from Pareso somewhere astray on his trail back to us. But when these were repeated, in a frantic flurry of detonations implying active combat, I began to suspect that all was not going well with our chief.

And at almost the same time, as though in an-

swer to that unexpected series of sounds, two other figures appeared above our ledge, on the far side of the fissure that cut their world off from our own.

One was blond and stalwart, with a crescent-bladed battle-ax strapped across his wide shoulders and in his great hand a lance twice his own length. Some trick of light seemed to magnify his proportions, so that he loomed above me unbelievably massive, like something out of a legend, gigantic and tawny and martial, oddly suggestive of a Viking chief on the prow of his galliass. There was courage in his poise and a cloudy grimness in his glance. And I knew, as I looked, that it was Karl Knutsson.

But it was the second figure beside him that I studied more closely. For this figure was tall and queenly, with a wealth of yellow gold hair of incredible luster and with an imperial sweep of line as she stood enthroned on that narrow plateau. She was not close to me, but in that cold and wind-clarified air she seemed close enough for speech, close enough for me to make out the beauty of the

intently brooding face and the shadowed azure of the eyes so heavily hooded by the brows where Time had left no furrow. And I knew, even before she turned to me, that we had found Thera again.

I must have shouted aloud, without quite knowing what I was doing. And they must have heard me, for they turned and stared at us as we faced them across that narrow fissure.

"We must help Pareso," I could hear Knutsson's great voice bellow out as he started down the broken cliff-face, loosening his corded battle-ax.

I called to Thera, warning her not to follow. If she heard me, she paid no attention to my cry. I could see her step from rock to rock as she sought a downward path after her mate. But I had no chance to follow her movements, for on the lower terrain, closer in to our fissure, I could already hear the renewed barking of Pareso's revolver. A moment later he himself came into view, fighting his way slowly upward, as a small but desperate band of spearmen slunk after him, seeking what cover they could find.

I saw little meaning in their maneuvers, until I realized that they were driving him, step by step, toward a narrow defile overhung by a porphyritic tuff, about the same as medieval doors were once overhung by watch-towers. And still I could not fully understand the nature of that movement, though I saw that Pareso was holding off his pursuers. Yet I noticed that he seemed searching for something, that he vacillated from side to side with preoccupied quick glances about him as he went. And the closer he came to the porphyritic ledge the more intent he seemed on that mysterious search.

He was almost under the shadow of that ledge before I understood the nature of his peril. For as I stared down on the strange scene I caught the first betraying sign of life and movement along the top of the ledge itself. I saw figures huddled there, flat on the rock. I made out the glitter of yellow metal, shining malignantly bright as it moved in the clearing morning air. And it was then and only then I realized how Pareso was being driven into an ambuscade.

I tried to warn him, but my voice failed to carry. I made signs and gestures, but he was so intent on his own ends that he paid no attention to me. He wanted his gold: that was the final and foolish thought that ran through my head. Even as he stood in that arrested attitude of perplexity, I could see one of the tribesmen rise from the rock and at the same time lift something above his head. It shone bright and yellow in the clear light. I realized, even as he poised it there above his shoulders, ready for hurling, that it was the battered eagle of gold from the vanished Temple of the Concourse. It was heavy, and it had many jagged points. And it seemed to have been saved for this one embittered end. For the next moment it crashed down on Pareso's head.

It struck him to the ground, like a bolt from the blue. And this seemed a signal for the others to join in that unexpected assault. For, of a sudden, they came scrambling to the edge of the rock-shoulder, each man with a fragment of his hoarded yellow metal in a waiting hand. And fragment by

fragment they rained this down on the prostrate figure so close below them. They flung them, methodically yet vindictively, flung them with strange cries of derision, pelted them down with barbaric shouts of hate, until the body was buried under that ironic shower of gold.

I had, of course, no way of reaching him, for between me and that flashing pile ran an abyss a hundred feet in depth. That fissure, as irregular yet as clear-cut as a water-lead in an Arctic ice-pack, was much too broad for leaping. And even though the means of bridging the chasm had stood close at hand, it was already too late to be of any help to that lost leader of ours. He was gone from us, for ever.

But even as I stared across the fissure I caught sight of Knutsson emerging from the shadow into the sunlight. His face was grim and his battle-ax was in his bronzed right hand. What arrested my attention, however, was the figure of Thera, who followed close behind him. There must have been another killing somewhere amid those rocks, for

even as she stepped out into the open she carried in her hand a native spear with a broken shaft. The tapering head of this spear was stained with blood, which she looked at with an untroubled eye and then casually wiped on the folds of her *kooletah*. Then she took the broken haft and broke it still shorter, snapping the seasoned wood over her knee and weighing the polished and long-pointed metal head in her hand, as though testing its possibilities as a stabbing instrument. There was neither terror nor horror on her face, and her voice seemed resolute enough as she called some word of warning to Knutsson, who abruptly ceased his advance and quartered back to her side, where he stood, like a harried moose at bay, awaiting the enemies who declined to advance. So heroic did he look, in that forlorn posture of defiance, that a new respect for the slow-thinking giant sprang up in my heart.

It was then that I called out to them.

"Don't go back!" I shouted. "You must cross the fissure lower down and come up on this side. It's the only way through!"

I don't think they understood me. I can't even be sure that they entirely heard me. Thera, I knew, threw a glance of perplexity in my direction, but it lasted a moment and little more. For it was plain, by this time, that both she and her mate were conscious of some secretive movement escaping my attention.

"Come on, you white-skinned rats!" Knutsson was crying with a sort of Berserker fury, shaking his russet fist at the enemies whom I could not decipher. But Thera, I could see, was now leading him backward, step by watchful step, as they guardedly retreated up the broken hillside, beating their way to the higher open ground that paralleled the rock-fissure between us. Sometimes they were on shale and gravel and sometimes they were on slopes of ice and tilted snow-fields maculated with glacial stones. I don't know whether it was mere accident or some phantasmal craving for companionship, but as they ascended, guarded foot by foot, they drew closer and closer to the parapet that separated us, so that I could see the hollowed white-

ness of Thera's throat and the knotted muscles on the bronzed and bristled arm of Knutsson.

And then, for the first time, I myself saw the slinking shadows that darted from rock to rock lower down the slope, the telltale flash of spear-heads congregating under bits of cover here and there, the sudden flash of an arrow that hurtled through the air and flattened its yellow head against a boulder-face.

I knew well enough what that meant. They were being hemmed in by the desperate remnants of Attapok's tribesmen, by men who were born trailers and hunters, by men who had seen all they had to live for wiped out and in this last assault on a proved enemy would show no shadow of mercy. Knutsson, I think, must have realized this, for there was a grim wariness in every move he made.

Then came a hiatus in all movement, as puzzling to me as it was to Knutsson himself, until I caught sight of old Attapok himself. He hobbled out into the open, making the peace sign, with his right arm held high above his head, palm outward.

I could see no answering sign from Knutsson. He merely stood silent and scowling, studying that audacious old figure, which advanced more cringingly as it drew closer to the giant with the crescent-bladed battle-ax in his right hand. I could not discern the motive behind that movement, but, knowing the wily Attapok as I did, I was on the point of shouting out to the blond giant to beware of treachery. But that warning of mine was not needed. Whether or not Knutsson concluded the movement to be a deceptive one, whether he caught sight of a hidden weapon under the folds of the old chieftain's clothing, or whether the futility of all further temporizing suddenly possessed him, I had no means of determining. But with a sudden sweep of his brawny arm Knutsson sent the wide-bladed ax flashing through the air. The curving edge of the blade caught the lean and leathery old neck as fairly as a woodsman's ax swings down on a birch-bole. And there was power behind it, for it swept the wrinkle-skinned head clean from the huddled shoulders. The body was still upright, geysering

crimson, when Knutsson sprang forward to recover his weapon.

And that was the beginning of the fight.

It quickly enough brought the hidden spearmen from under cover, brought them swarming up the rocky slope like hurdle-racers up a hill. Knutsson, as he thrust Thera behind him and faced their first wave of assault, must have known it was kill, and kill without quarter. He used his long-handled spear, and he thrust and struck with a truly Titanic ferocity. I saw an arrow flash through the air, and heard his short bark of rage as he plucked it out of his flesh and tossed it aside. And the next moment I saw his spear-shaft snapped in two and the moon-shaped battle-ax once more in his hands. I saw that flailing blade come down on an intent blond face that had ducked in under his guard, a blond face with a sinister smile of triumph on its lips. But the ax, cleaving deep, cut that smile in two. And the next moment, swinging wide, it cleared a circle about the lone fighter, who shouted for the woman to fall back while she had time.

But Thera had no intention of retreating. She flung her spear-head into the belly of a diminutive tribesman who suddenly scuttled down on her, and when another, circling about, missed his thrust and stumbled against her knees, she caught him up bodily and with one regal sweep of her arms flung the absurdly wriggling body into the abyss. Then she snatched up Knutsson's broken spear and fought her way toward her mate, whose blade had fallen from his hand and who, at the moment, was intent on seizing an enemy's head between his bare hands and crushing the tow-haired skull against the rock-wall behind him.

Yet all the while, as they fought, they were falling back, step by step, leaving a trail of red across a narrow snow-field and slipping ludicrously as they fidgeted for better footing on small moraines of ice. I could neither join them nor help them. But I thought, for a mad minute or two, that they still had a chance of fighting their way free, that luck would in some way be with them and they would yet live to know quieter hours under quieter

skies. But Thera's clothing, by this time, was partly torn from her body, and along one rounded white shoulder I could see a welt of red, where a spear-head had seared into the flesh. Clear above the smaller noises I could hear her cry of defiance as she thrust her spear-head through a startled lean torso and flung body and spear together over the gorge. She had intended, I think, to reach for one of the falling weapons on which they were treading. She had even stooped forward a little when one of the wounded spearmen on the ground, rolling over in a languid half-turn, sent an arrow which he had already fitted to his short bow straight up against the bared white breast.

It sank deep, and even from where I stood I could catch the look of wonder that mounted to Thera's face as her hand went up toward her heart. She did not fall. But she seemed to be groping for the root of a pain which she could not understand. Her wavering right arm, in her extremity, even went out to Knutsson, who saw it and understood. And that embattled Viking, hard

pressed as he was, fought back his enemies with the flailing battle-ax in his right hand while his left arm clasped about his mate. But he could not keep them from closing in on him. There were not many of them left, it's true, but the few who remained seemed determined to die in a cause now close to its final moment. And even as it was, Knutsson must already have been mortally wounded, for no human being could be so hacked and pierced and battered without having the very heart of him drained dry of blood. He must, in fact, have realized that his hour had come. For with a final animal-like bellow he turned on his enemies and flung his battle-ax into their midst. Then, before they could quite recover, he took the tall and queenly figure of his mate in his arms and staggered to the lip of the precipice. For just a moment he held the white face close up to his own. I could never be sure whether he kissed her or not. Nor could I be certain of the words that he called out before those two interlocked bodies made that fatal and final plunge.

I turned away, sick and shaken, and staggered to the shale-shelf where Ota sat staring across the fissure.

"It's over!" I cried aloud as Ota's emotionless face reminded me that she was, after all, little more than a savage, little more than a smoothed-skinned pagan doll. It brought sharply home to me that my one remaining companion was not a queen with immemorial azure eyes but a pallid-tressed mountain-girl who stood a world away from me and my thoughts and hopes.

But there was one other thing I remembered as I stood, embittered, staring into her face. And that was, whatever may have happened or might yet happen, I was committed to her until the end. We were alone, she and I, in an empty world of our own, with an empty future to face.

"Come on!" I cried as I turned toward the twisted narrow trail that led up to the pass. "There's nothing here to wait for!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE END OF THE TRAIL

Out of the welter of emotions that surged through my body, like beach-waves through a pound-net, I can remember a later feeling of shame for the way in which I had thought of my one surviving companion. I knew, as we resumed our climb up those perilous slopes, that I had not been fair with Ota. I even recalled that I never could be entirely fair with her. But, if God in His goodness saw fit to deliver us from the dangers that still surrounded us, I could yet make amends. I could at least give her what remained of my wasted life. And that resolution brought a shadow of peace about my troubled heart.

Then, oddly enough, it began to snow. It snowed, not with the customary mountain-squall

that flings wind and violence between glowering peaks, but softly and quietly. It snowed silently and impassively, with a feeling of sadness in the noiselessly falling flakes. It snowed thinly yet steadily, with a valedictory air that seemed to hang a gray curtain between us and our over-troubled past. And it lent a touch of the phantasmal to Ota, who went first along the trail, not so much because she was surer of the way but more because I remained secretly afraid that some lone skulker of that lost tribe might be following up our tracks.

I trudged close after her, with my pack on my shoulders, with the silence about us like the silence of death. And I became persuaded, as we toiled painfully on, that we were for all time free of our enemies. We were bound for the doorway that opened into a new world. And our only foes, from that hour forward, would be cold and hunger.

Yet I kept looking back, from time to time, for I wanted no final mishap to interfere with that final flight. My glance, in fact, must have been half averted as we rounded a misty shoulder of rock

along that ever-narrowing trail, otherwise I should have more promptly seen what awaited us there on the narrow ledge between the solid mountainside and the perilous lip of the precipice.

But so quickly did we stumble into that unexpected ambush that I had scant time for either thought or action. All I know was that when I looked up, at a small cry from Ota, I found we were confronted by a crouching group of spearmen with their lances poised.

They stood shoulder to shoulder in the narrow portal between the precipitous rock-face and the open chasm. I thought, at first, that there were at least a half-dozen of them. It also flashed through my mind that they must have known those upper hills much better than we'd imagined, for they'd posted themselves at a point where they could most easily cut off our advance and most definitely bring all combat to a final issue. And as they stood there in the falling snow I could see in each intent face a hate that told me how, in this last stand, no quarter would be given and no quarter would be asked.

I caught at Ota's shoulder, to thrust her behind me. But for one brief moment she wavered against me, with her hands clutching my body and her head pressed against my heart. There was even the shadow of a smile on her lips as her eyes sought mine, as she looked hungrily into my face. If I wondered at that look, my wonder was brief. For a thrown spear, flashing past my cheek-bone, buried its head in the pack strapped high on my shoulders. And that seemed a signal for Ota, who broke from my grasp and started forward, with her arms outspread, as though to fling herself on those clustered spear-heads.

I flung her back, almost savagely, as I caught up the spear fallen between my feet. And a moment later I sent the shimmering thin head of it through the entrails of a tribesman who ran for me, head on. A second charge came, as Ota was reaching for that tribesman's fallen weapon. But I faced them and fought them with a drunken fury that left no room for the thought of death. And when I emerged from that final delirium of rage I found

Ota standing beside me, with a spear in her hand, ruddied half-way to its hilt.

I think we killed all of them. I could never be sure, for there was a madness in my blood that left memory none too dependable. But I at least know that nothing remained on that narrow and blood-stained ledge, nothing beyond two or three broken spear-heads which I tied together and swung from my waist. Then, taking Ota by the hand, I began the climb to the pass. I began our fight to get free of those hills, as desolate of heart as the last man left alive on a lost and dying world. . . .

How we got over that pass and fought our way down into the lonely tundra beyond, will never be quite clear to my own mind. I think, most of the time, I was a little out of my head. I can remember plodding on, toiling on and on, through gloaming weather, through snow-streaked mornings and ice-green noons and never-ending twilights empty of all sound, seeking always the lower terrain.

Then we came to a coast and a cluster of igloos, where I bartered a spear-head of gold for food and

seal clothing and mukluks of walrus. But these impoverished Eskimos could neither understand our talk nor persuade themselves we were not Evil Spirits come in their midst. So we forged on again, following the coast-line, where we were finally picked up, half-dead, by a Danish white whaler. But here again we did not speak the language of our rescuers, though it must have been plain to them that I was a sick man and much in need of help. I know, however, that both Ota and our whaler captain were much kinder to me than I deserved, while I lay week after week in that none too comfortable lazaretto, waiting for the ice to move.

By the time the *Fridtjof* was free of that ice and rounding into Fort Alexander for repairs—after a merciless pounding in the upper Behring Sea—I was on my feet and able to move about again. At Fort Alexander I secured passage for Ota and myself on a coaster down to Prince Rupert, where we duly received benefit of clergy and for a season I worked with the halibut-fleet that fished the waters of Dixon Entrance.

But all along I nursed a nostalgia for the South, a craving for warmth and softness. I had a morbid dread of the North. So with the coming of winter Ota and I embarked on a lumber-schooner bound for Honolulu. And in that Edenic climate, while I did not materially mend my fortune working for a thrifty Japanese importer named Shimizu, I gradually forgot my ills of the body. But once I was better in health, I grew vaguely homesick for other things, and in half a year's time returned to Vancouver, where I was once more among my own people and where, eventually, I found a semblance of peace on a fruit-ranch in the Okanogan Valley. And there, sometimes when the quiet-eyed Ota is busy with her household duties and the touch of some old unrest creeps into my blood, I take from its hiding-place a single tress of hair, a tress of hair incredibly and regally golden, and wonder if it once belonged to Thera, the daughter of Olaf, or merely to an unhappy woman once known to the world as Olga Shashkov.

THE END

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